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IN FAR LOCHABER.

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BY

WILLIAM BLACK,

AUTHOR OF

"A PRINCESS OF THULE," "MACLEOD OF DARE," ETC.

K+ b 444

NEW EDITION.

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IN FAR LOCHABER.

CHAPTER I.

IN FETTERS.

KIRK O' SHIELDS, a small town in Lanarkshire, that all the week long was a roaring pandemonium of noise and fire and steam—engines shrieking, boiler-works hammering, blasts and furnaces belching forth red flame into the heavy, smoke-laden atmosphere—sank of a Sunday into a sudden and unnatural quiet, that seemed to deepen and deepen as the slow hours of the afternoon dragged by and darkness and the night came down. And nowhere was the silence more marked and impressive than in the Minister's parlour, whence all worldly thoughts and cares and interests were supposed to be scrupulously banished, and the evening, after the active services of the day, given over to silent reading and meditation. On this particular Sabbath night there were three persons in the hushed little room, all of them absorbed in their pious task; and not a sound was audible beyond the occasional turning over of a leaf, or perhaps (for human nature is frail, and the time passed slowly) a bit of a half-concealed sigh from one of the girls. The Minister himself sat in the big easy-chair by the fireplace, the family Bible spread open on his knees, his head slightly inclined for-

ward, his two hands partly supporting the ponderous volume. He was rather a small man, of pronounced and stern features; his forehead deeply lined; his dark gray eyes, set under bushy eyebrows, usually expressing a profound and habitual melancholy, though at times they were capable of flashing forth a fire of resentment or indignation. Suffering had left its traces on this worn and furrowed face, but the resignation of the Christian was there as well. If the heavy brows, the keen nostrils, the strong upper lip and still stronger under lip, showed determination, not to say doggedness, of will, the deep-set, unutterably sad gray eyes were those of a man who had come through much tribulation, and had brought himself to accept these trials as the discipline of an all-wise and all-merciful Father.

Of the two daughters who were seated at the table, both with books before them, the elder, Alison by name, was a young woman of eighteen or nineteen, of pale complexion, clear gray eyes with dark eyelashes, and smoothly braided dark brown hair. A calm intelligence and a sufficient self-possession were visible in her shapely forehead and well-cut mouth; but at this moment the ordinary bright and friendly scrutiny of her eyes had given way to an absent look as she leaned forward over her reading. Perhaps she saw but little of the printed page before her. In church that morning, after the introductory psalm had been sung, the Minister had advanced to the front of the pulpit and made the brief announcement: "The prayers of this congregation are requested for a young woman about to enter upon a long journey;" and the protracted and earnest and curiously personal appeal that followed for Divine protection and loving-kindness and guardianship was known by all the people present to be made on behalf of the Minister's own daughter, Alison Blair. And now, despite the strict

exclusion of all worldly things from the meditations of the Sabbath evening, perhaps there were visions before those mild, clear, calm gray eyes. On the morrow Alison Blair was going away into an unknown country.

The younger sister, Agnes, was of the same complexion as Alison, but there was less decision of character in her refined and gentle face. Her large eyes were wistful, the mouth sensitive even to sadness, and her delicate features looked all the more ethereal that they were set about by faintly straw-coloured hair that even sunlight could hardly have made to shimmer into gold. And if in this noiseless small room there were visions also before her eyes, they were visions of no earthly country or earthly pilgrimage Her favourite reading was the Book of Revelation, and she did not tire of it; for where was the limit to her far-reaching dreams of the new heaven and the new earth, the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband? Nay, in this profound stillness could she not hear some distant murmur, as coming from the wide and wonderful spaces that were visible to her mental eyes? On these Sabbath evenings Kirk o' Shields lay silent in the darkness, as if stricken by the hand of death. But in the mystical and shining far regions that she beheld, were there no sounds that could come faintly towards an intently listening ear, across the starlit deeps of the sky? "And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to Him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints." Kirk o' Shields, and all its squalor and din and wretchedness, were forgotten in these

entranced dreams; she beheld a great multitude, arrayed in shining robes, and singing, as it were, a new song. "And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth." And in her fanciful way she listened, and still listened, and seemed to hear, as the hushed half-hours went by.

"Alison," said the Minister, happening to look up, "what book is that ye're reading?"

The sudden breaking of the deep silence startled the girl, but she answered the question, naming a well-known Sunday magazine, a bound volume of which lay before her on the table.

"I thought as much," said the Minister, with a brief sigh of resignation, and he returned to his Bible.

But the next moment he had looked up again, and in the deep-set gray eyes there was an angry glow of indignation.

"And a fine thing it is," he said, with a resentment that was none the less bitter that it was uttered in slow and measured tones—"a fine thing it is to bring novels and romances into a God-fearing family under the guise of reading fitted for the Sabbath-day—ay, and ministers of the Gospel not ashamed to lend their names to such a practice. But the Enemy of Mankind has inseedious ways and means; he'll take servants where he can get them, even if they're just come down from the pulpit; and little does the Reverend This or the Reverend That think whose work he is about when he is passing perneecious and soul-destroying leeterature into honest households. It's not enough that the frivolous and idle and worldly should steep their minds in that poison; the remnant of Israel, that have been trying to keep the Lord's Day pure and sanctified to His name, they must be induced to drink also, and by His own appointed servants. His servants? the

Devil's servants I call them: purveyors of lying, what else can they be? The worship of lying—that is a strange worship to be seen among men. And look at the altars the poor, blind, deluded creatures are proud to raise! Look at the monument in Prince's Street of Edinburgh, and the monument in George's Square in Glasgow, to the Great Liar! Grand monuments they are—braw monuments they are—raising their tall columns into the skies, and saying to every one that passes by, 'This is the man the nation delighteth to honour!' Honour for the Greatest Liar—that is the new worship on the face of God's earth. But of one thing, lass, you may be sure—that when the Lord's persecuted people were being driven from moor to moss, and from glen to hill-side, scattered here and hewn down there by the bloody dragoons—scarcely daring to lift up their voices in prayer and supplication lest their pursuers should overtake and overwhelm them—they little thought or cared whether they should be made a by-word and a jest for the amusement of the Edinburgh lawyers and their fine leddies and misses. They knew that the flame in their hearts was of the Lord's kindling; they knew that their blood, spilt on the heather, would not be spilt in vain. The Scotland of this day is a degenerate country surely if she doesna bethink her of what she owes to the martyrs of the Covenant." He paused for a second or two; his eyes lost their fire and resumed their ordinary expression of profound and resigned sadness. "And yet I wonder," he said, slowly, "what old Adam Blair of Moss-end would have thought if he could have foreseen the time when preachers of the Gospel, ordained ministers of the Church of Christ, would connive at making novel-reading a pastime in believing families—ay, and what he would have thought could he have foreseen one of his own name and lineage busy with such work on a Sabbath evening."

"I was not reading the story, father," Alison said gently; "but I will go and get another book."

Softly she stole away to her own little room upstairs. She had no need of any light; a dull red glow—a pulsating red glow, waxing and waning in fitful flushes—shone through the brown blind of the solitary window. In former years every house-window in Kirk o' Shields, as in most other Scotch towns, had its blind thus drawn down all day long on the Sabbath, as a matter of ordinary decorum; but this observance has now almost entirely disappeared; only here and there a respecter of other days—a minister, or elder, or church officer, or the like—tenaciously clings to the old custom. And of course the Rev. Ebenezer Blair was among these. He belonged to the famous family of the Blairs of Moss-end, who had borne their testimony in troublous times, and had achieved great honour in these parts; and in all things, even in the smallest, Ebenezer Blair was content to walk in the footsteps of his forefathers, whatever might be the changing fashion of his neighbours or friends.

Alison easily found the volume that she sought; but before returning to the room below, she went to the window, and put the blind aside a few inches, and looked out. Those red flames of the iron-works, now flashing up into the darkness of the night, and sending a swift crimson glow along the chimneys and slates of the opposite houses, had always had for her a singular fascination. Perhaps it was that they formed the one beautiful thing, the one beautiful piece of colour, visible in the murky atmosphere that hung over Kirk o' Shields from week's end to week's end. In the daytime the flames were of an orange hue—lambent tiger-lilies she thought they were, shining afar amid that melancholy waste of gray; but at night they changed to crimson, and she could imagine them to be the fires of great altars, fed from unknown depths, and leaping

with their sudden, resplendent stag-horns of light into the black skies overhead. Silent and beautiful they were; not fierce in any way; the quick rose-flush that lit up the slates and the chimneys seemed a friendly thing; the night was made less lonely. Was this a farewell look, then? To-morrow she would be leaving those giant, silent, beautiful altar-flames far behind.

At random—for what few books were in the room were all of a religious cast—she had taken a volume from the top of a chest of drawers, and it was not until she returned to her place in the parlour below that she discovered what she had done. She had unwittingly brought with her the book of all the books in the house that she most dreaded —to wit, Paley's "Evidences of Christianity." There was a Free Library in Kirk o' Shields; Alison Blair had the curiosity naturally accompanying a mind at once acute and intrepid; little did her friends and acquaintances, still less her own immediate relatives, imagine how familiar she was with, and how eagerly she followed, the new speculations, problems, theories of these later times. Darwin, Huxley, Spencer were to her more than mere names and echoes of names. But even to her all this modern intellectual movement was in a manner a distant thing; it seemed to be happening in some other planet; it had no relation to the actual facts of her own life. She could read an article on the Mosaic account of creation without seriously feeling that the authority of Scripture was being impugned. It was something that interested her in a vague kind of way, this discussion going on in that distant realm; in nowise did it seem to affect the assured and abiding faith in revelation that she held in common with the people among whom she dwelt. To them this certain faith was all in all; it was their one possession—a heavenly as well as an earthly possession; holding fast by that, the poorest of them were richer than

princes or kings; death had no sting for them, hell no terrors; an everlasting crown was before them; washed in the blood of the Lamb, and made white as snow, they would pass into the joy of their Lord. In works (as they were never tired of insisting to each other) there was no virtue; works were carnal, and a snare to the soul; in faith alone was saving grace; and how, Alison might have asked herself, could these poor people around her, whose austere piety had something pathetic in it, even when they had "got assurance," as the phrase was—how could they or this priceless belief of theirs be affected by what scientific men, and literary men, and statesmen, and others, were writing in magazines and reviews in the far-away city of London?

And then there came a time—a chance phrase in an article had struck an unexpected chord—when her heart seemed to stand still for a moment. Was the Christian religion, then, but a passing phenomenon—similar to other phenomena that had appeared in the world before and since—and with no higher sanction than its own lofty morality and purity of aim? The question was a startling one, but it did not terrify her. She had been brought up in an atmosphere of conviction. She had been accustomed to regard these writings and speculations as something quite apart from the present facts and conditions of life. Still, just by way of curiosity, perhaps, or to comfort herself by making assurance doubly sure, she thought she would make a patient study of Paley's "Evidences," which she had not read since she was a child of twelve.

Alas! this book did terrify her—for a time. Doubts that she had never dreamed of before—for her childish reading had been entirely perfunctory—were now presented to her mind; and they seemed to have a far more startling significance than the elaborate arguments which were meant to resolve them. Why, on the very first page

she read these strange words: "Suppose, nevertheless, almost the whole race, either by the imperfection of their faculties, the misfortune of their situation, or by the loss of some prior revelation, to want this knowledge, and not to be likely, without the aid of a new revelation, to attain it. . . ." Was, then, the history of God's dealings with mankind so much a matter of conjecture—was that portion of it included in the Christian revelation so small and temporary and fragmentary a thing—that one had to guess at some previous revelation rather than believe that countless generations of the sons of men had lived and died in ignorance and gone to their doom? This was but the beginning; her imagination, with a rapidity she could not control, would persist in asking further and further questions, and the only answer was a shuddering dread. For she was quite alone. There was no one to whom she could go for guidance and help. Between her father and herself there was doubtless a measure, perhaps a considerable measure, of affection: he on his part regarding her with the natural instinct of protection and care; she on her part moved to deep admiration by his stern integrity of character. But that affection took no visible sign. An expression of it would have been regarded as more than a weakness, as something culpable, as putting the creature before the Creator: for was not all the love and gratitude of the human heart due to the Divine Father? And as between the Minister and his children there was no expression of affection, so there was no confidence. When Alison, in her first bewilderment and alarm, thought of her going to her father with these doubts and perplexities, she could see his eyes afire with astonishment and anger. No pity there, but wrath: what devil had entered into her?—why had she not striven and wrestled to cast him out forthwith? Was the Evil Spirit still vexing her? To her knees, then! in her own chamber—with prayer

and fasting and supplication—till she could come to say she was restored and in her right mind.

There was Agnes, it is true; and between the two girls there was a devoted affection—though betraying itself in deeds more than in words—and a close confidence as well. But how was she to darken that fair young mind with her own morbid, and probably foolish, imaginings? Not even in her loneliest hours, when her soul in its agony seemed crying aloud for a single word of sympathy, could she go to her sister. Her sister?—who *knew* that their mother, dead these many years, sometimes came to see them in the mid hours of the night, in the little room where they slept together. Again and again (so the younger girl averred, with eyes grown mystical and strange) she had seen the pale figure, gentle and smiling, who stood by the side of the bed and regarded her two children. Nay, she had heard her.

"I don't know how it is, Ailie," she would say, as the two sisters sat before the fire by themselves of a winter evening, "but I seem to hear her when she comes into the room. I cannot make out what the noise is, or whether it is a noise, but it is something I hear and know. It wakes me; and when I open my eyes I find her standing at the foot of the bed, and sometimes at the side, and quite near. And I'm not in the least afraid, she looks so kind; just the old way, Ailie, you remember, when she would meet us coming home from school? And some night I am going to say to her, 'Mother, will ye no waken Ailie too? for she hardly believes you come to see her.'"

"Hush, hush, Aggie!" the elder sister would say; "you should not speak of such things, for they pass understanding; and I doubt whether father would not be angry if he were to hear."

"Some night you will see for yourself," the younger sister would say, and then fall into silence and reverie.

However, the paroxysm of alarm and uncertainty caused by Paley's "Evidences of Christianity" was not of long duration. Alison put the book aside and would not open it again. These doubts were all too terrible; she shrank back from the appalling loneliness in which she found herself. Nay, she strove to convince herself that she had been properly punished for wandering away from the fold and following her own poor reason. Who was she, to set up her individual judgment against the authority of the preachers and teachers in Israel? Paley himself was but a human being like any other; surely it was a perilous thing, in a matter of such supreme moment, to follow a fallible guide! Womanlike, she clung to the majority; and the majority—not to say the entire community—of those around her were possessed by a faith which, however sombre it might be, was at least unwavering and questionless. Paley's "Evidences" lay on the top of the chest of drawers in her room, and remained there untouched.

But it was not for long that on this evening she had to practise the harmless hypocrisy of holding the book open before her, while she would not allow herself to read a single disquieting word.

"Alison," said the Minister, presently, as he transferred the big Bible from his knees to the table, and drew in his chair, "ye may call in the weemen now."

Agnes went and got "the books;" and directly afterwards, the two women-servants of the household, summoned by Alison, came into the room. The younger of these was a stout, red-haired, freckled, black-eyed wench, whose apathetic manner seemed to suggest that she would be glad enough when this ordeal was over.

"Dod, but our Minister dings a'!" this buxom lass was used to say in confidence to her gossips. "He doesna gie the Lord a minute's peace. It's ask-asking and beg-beg-

ging frae morning till nicht. I'm sure I hope it'll no be like my brither Jock at hame. When he gangs fishing on the Lernock—so the lads say—he keeps whuppin' and whuppin'—the water is never at rest for a second—and deil a sea-trout or a grilse does he e'er bring hame wi' him. Look at the Sawbath, Kirsty, woman, that they ca' a day o' rest. A day o' rest! There's faimily worship at nine, when a body has scarcely got their breakfast swallowed; then the Minister he's off to the Young Men's Christian Association—that's at ten o'clock in the hall. Then there's the kirk itsel' at half-past eleeven: and the folk have hardly time to come out and look about them when it's in again at twa o'clock for anither couple o' hours. Then there's the Minister's Bible class at six, and family worship again at nine. Dod, I never saw the like! Weel, I suppose the Minister kens best. Sometimes the wean that keeps whingeing and whingeing * gets what it greets for. And sometimes," she would add, snappishly, "it gets a scud o' the side o' the head."

But the elder servant—a tall woman she was, dark-complexioned, and meagre of face—came into the room with a kind of furtive fear in her eyes. This woman—the solitary exception in this community—was possessed by the dreadful conviction that she was not of the elect; she was an outcast, consigned to everlasting punishment; the scheme of salvation had no place for her; and whatever portion of the Scripture might be read, the denunciations of the wicked could hardly be less terrible to her than descriptions of the eternal joys and glories from which she was hopelessly and for ever shut out. She was wholly reticent about this conviction of hers; but it was well known. More than once Alison had unwittingly come upon the poor wretch when she was on her knees, appeal-

* The child that keeps whimpering and whimpering.

ing with passionate tears and sobs, not that she might be forgiven, and allowed to take the lowest place among the ransomed, but that she might be enabled to lift up her heart to the Lord in gratitude for all His goodness to her. She did not complain of her awful fate, or seek in any way to escape from it. It was the Lord's will; let Him be praised. And when Alison, shuddering to think of any human being going through life with this fearful doom continually before her, would say, "But, Margaret, what is the sin against the Holy Ghost? What is the unforgivable sin? You do not even know what it is!" she would shake her head in silence, or answer with her favourite text: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him!"

"We will praise God by singing the eightieth Psalm," the Minister began; and when they had found their places, he himself started the tune—the old, familiar "Martyrdom" it was—which was at once taken up by the fresh, clear voices of the girls—

"Hear, Israel's Shepherd! Like a flock
Thou that dost Joseph guide:
Shine forth, O Thou that dost between
The cherubims abide!
In Ephraim's and Benjamin's,
And in Manasseh's sight,
O come for our salvation:
Stir up Thy strength and might.

"Turn us again, O Lord our God,
And upon us vouchsafe
To make Thy countenance to shine,
And so we shall be safe.
O Lord of hosts, almighty God,
How long shall kindled be
Thy wrath against the prayer made
By Thine own folk to Thee?"

The singing over, he opened the large Bible and proceeded to read the second chapter of the Book of Ruth —no doubt choosing the story of the young Moabitess

who left her own country and went to live among an unknown people as having some reference to Alison and her departure on the morrow. And finally, when they all knelt down, and he engaged in prayer, his fervent appeal for Divine protection for this child of his who was going away into a strange land was even more personal and immediate than that he had preferred in open church. Not only so, but it was full of urgent and earnest admonition and exhortation addressed to herself. They were no common and worldly dangers she was to dread; these things were of little account; in this transitory space of time called life, sickness and sorrow, trouble and disease and death itself, were but trivial accidents. It was the far more deadly peril that the Christian soul might have to encounter that was to be feared—the insidious attacks of Satan—pride of heart, the allurements of the eye, frivolity, forgetfulness that every moment of time was of value in preparing for the Judgment-day of the Lord. And then he spoke of her going forth alone—and yet not alone; and his last words were words of consolation: "Behold, He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is thy keeper: the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand. The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: He shall preserve thy soul. The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore."

Worship concluded, the women went their several ways, leaving the Minister to finish up his reading and put out the lights. And soon silence and sleep had fallen over the whole household—bringing to the poor creature Margaret, it is to be hoped, some temporary and blessed forgetfulness of the awful doom for ever before her waking eyes; and to Agnes Blair, perhaps, the mystic vision of a gentle and smiling mother, standing by her

bedside and regarding her with a wistful affection; while as for Alison, it is to be imagined that her dreams were most likely to be of the far country she was about to enter, when she had left behind her the turmoil and din and lowering skies, the rigid observances, the monotonous duties, the incessant and morbid introspection, the cramped and fettered life of Kirk o' Shields.

CHAPTER II.

THE BIT LADY.

LEAGUE upon league of glassy calm, save where some wandering puff of wind stirred the still sea into a deeper blue; the long green island of Lismore basking in the sun, and tapering away to its southernmost point, where the small white light-house stands; the hills of Morven, in hues of faint rose-gray and lilac, grown distant in the heat; close by, the winding shores of the main-land, with wooded knolls, and crags, and bays where the shallow water showed the sand below: this was the picture that Alison saw all around her as the great steamer thundered and throbbed away northward through the fair, summer-like day. Surely here was a new heaven and a new earth —after Kirk o' Shields. And brilliant and beautiful as it was, it was all so restful. On board the steamer, it is true, the sunlight burned hot on the white deck, and on the scarlet funnels, and on the crimson velvet cushions beside her; but she could turn her bewildered eyes away from this overpowering blaze, and let them dwell gratefully on the wide blue spaces of the sea, and on the hills that had grown almost ethereal in the haze produced by fine weather, and on a sky that down at the horizon-line in the south had scarcely any colour in it at all. A day of pale azure and silver it was; calm and shining and clear; there was not anywhere overhead a single fleecy flake to throw a patch of purple shadow on the far-stretching and resplendent plain.

By the air around her suddenly becoming warmer, she guessed that the steamer was lessening its speed; and presently, when the great paddles had been stopped and then reversed, driving a mass of white, seething foam down into the clear bottle-green water, she found they were alongside Port Appin pier. With a natural curiosity, for she was a stranger in a strange land, she was scanning the small group of people assembled to meet their friends or their packages (and perhaps she was contrasting the fresh complexions and trim and trig adornment of one or two of the Highland lasses there with the too-familiar appearance of the bareheaded, tartan-shawled, worn-faced women who made up the bulk of the female population of Kirk o' Shields), when her eye happened to light on a new-comer, who was hastening down to the boat. He was a young man, and not over middle height; but there was something effective and picturesque in the set of his strongly built frame, in the carriage of his head, and even in the long and easy and careless stride with which he came down the quay. He was none too soon; indeed the hawsers had been cast off and the gangway withdrawn when he stepped, or leaped, on to the paddle-box. He turned for a moment to wave his hand to one or two companions who had come as far as the head of the pier with him; then he entered into conversation with the captain, the two of them being apparently very good friends.

She was sitting here alone and observant; and she seemed to perceive a peculiar sunniness (so to speak) and cheerfulness in this young man's look and bearing. Also she was aware that he had singularly clear eyes; for once or twice they were turned in her direction, and instantly she had to drop her own. For the rest, his costume was novel to her. Sportsmen have no occasion to go wandering along the grimy streets of Kirk o' Shields. She had never seen anybody in knickerbockers; and the simple and ser-

viceable garb—laced boots and Highland hose, a homespun shooting-jacket, a Tam o' Shanter drawn forward over his brow, a bit of red silk tie showing under his flannel shirt-collar—seemed somehow to suit the easy self-possession of his manner. Then he had the complexion of one familiar with the sun and sea-air; fair as he was, his skin was a trifle darker than his short, twisted yellow moustache. Dandified?—perhaps a little. And yet there was a manly look about the breadth of his shoulders; he had a flat back, a well-knit calf, and small ankle; and always there was a kind of pride in the poise of his head. He was laughing and talking with the captain, but he was looking around at the same time; more than once she had to swiftly lower her eyes.

It was about a couple of minutes thereafter—and to her astonishment and dismay—that she found this young man approaching her. She knew, rather than saw, that he touched his cap.

"I beg your pardon, but may I ask if you are Miss Blair?"

She ought to have been still further startled; but the sound of his voice was pleasant to the ear.

"Y—yes," she said, glancing timidly upward.

"I know your friends in Fort William," said he, "and they asked me to look after you, and get your luggage ashore for you. Of course they will be down at the quay; but I will see your things got ready, if you will let me, so that you won't have any trouble."

"Oh, thank you," said she, hardly knowing what to say.

"I understand you have not been in the Highlands before," he continued; and with the greatest coolness he sat down beside her on the velvet cushion, and laid his arm on the gunwale of the steamer.

"No," she answered; but all the time she was asking

herself what had enabled him to identify her. Was there some Kirk o' Shields peculiarity in her dress or appearance?

"You are lucky in having such a beautiful day for your first glimpse of them," he went on to say, with much placid assurance. "It isn't always like this. Those hills over there—Kingairloch that is—and those away up yonder, by Inversanda and Ardgour—they are not nearly so far away as they seem to be; it is the haze of the settled weather that makes them appear distant. That is Shuna island: do you see the old castle? Why, there's a seal—look!"

She turned her eyes in the direction indicated, and could make out a round dark object on the pale blue-white plain.

"I shouldn't wonder if that is the old fellow that goes backward and forward after the ferry-boat between Port Appin and Lismore. He is a friendly old chap; I dare say he has followed us so far just for the sake of company. There—he's down—off again, I suppose, for Appin."

Presently he said—perhaps casting back a little—

"I hope you will pardon my bluntness in addressing you, but, you see, I had made pretty sure. I had a good look round, though I fixed on you from the first. You seem surprised? Well, I had heard you described so often, you know. Your Aunt Gilchrist is never done talking about you, and she told me again and again how I should recognize you. 'And when you see her'—this was her last message when I was coming away—'tell "*the bit lady*" that I am just wearying for her.' That is what she always calls you—'the bit lady.'"

"It was a childish nickname," Alison said quickly, with her pale face and forehead showing some brief colour of embarrassment.

"Oh, I know," said he, with a careless good-humour;

"I know quite well. I have had the minutest descriptions of you at a very early age indeed. I have heard a good deal about 'the bit lady,' who was so prim, and precise, and accurate in her speech, and dignified in her manner. Oh yes, and very fierce she was in correcting rude boys, I understand. I have heard, too, of her remonstrating with the servants about their grammar; and of her repetition of 'Fetual Calling;' and of her tame sparrow that was scolded because it wouldn't speak."

Alison grew more and more embarrassed; it was so strange to find a perfectly unknown person so intimately acquainted with her early years, and on such familiar speaking-terms with herself. She managed to interrupt him by asking how her Aunt Gilchrist was.

"Oh, very well indeed. Last night she was in the highest of spirits. I suppose she was rid for the time of her rheumatism, or whatever the mysterious ailment is that she makes such fun of when it isn't there; and she made the old Doctor suffer. But he doesn't mind much. For all their quarrelling, I never knew two sweethearts half so fond of each other as the Doctor and his sister are. If he scolds her the one moment he is petting her the next. And I am sure that both he and his wife, and all the family indeed, are remarkably good-natured so far as you are concerned; for your Aunt Gilchrist makes not the slightest secret that she is going to leave her money to you—or the most of it; and yet they don't seem jealous; they tease her about it quite openly; and I think you will find they will make you as welcome as the old lady herself. You haven't seen much of them?"

"Of my uncle's family?" said Alison—and now she was growing less embarrassed, for this young man seemed so pleasant, and natural, and unaffected in manner; and moreover he appeared to know all about her kinsfolk. "No, not very much; only when they came once or twice

to see my Aunt Gilchrist in Edinburgh." And then she added, glancing up at him for a second, "Is Flora as pretty as ever?"

"Miss Flora," said he, "is quite the belle of Fort William, as she lets all of us know. And as light-hearted as ever, I need not tell you that. By the way, I suppose you know what she calls you? Haven't you heard? She calls you Miss Dimity Puritan."

For the first time a bit of a smile hovered round Alison's mouth, though her eyes were as usual downcast.

"I seem to have various names in Fort William," she remarked.

"But they are all given to you in kindness, any way," he answered. "Oh, I assure you that your coming is considered to be a very great affair; and I look on myself as very fortunate in being your escort even this little bit of the way."

He could not say any more at present, for the steamer was slowing into Ballachulish pier; and Alison was much interested in watching the people land and set out by coach for Glencoe. She had risen now from her seat, and when she addressed remarks or questions to the young man who was by her side, it never occurred to Miss Dimity Puritan that she was talking to a person whose very name she did not know. He seemed to belong to that family in Fort William—to her uncle's family. Then he was not obtrusive in his attentions; he was at her command—no more; and besides, his voice was soft and musical and pleasant to listen to. He tried to get her to say *Balla-chaolish*, but she only laughed a little and declined.

Presently they set out northward again; and he told her the names of the various mountains—those giant masses whose sterile altitudes, rising far above the sparsely wooded slopes and precipices, seemed to recede away from

human ken; although along their base, here and there, was some narrow strip of cultivation—a field with the hay gathered into cocks (for, summer-like as the day was, they were now at the end of August), or a patch of yellowing corn just over the deep sapphire of the sea. Then, when they had got through the Narrows of Corran, they came in sight of the mighty bulk of Ben Nevis, towering high above the lower hills of bracken and heather, its vast shoulders of granite seamed with rose-pink scaurs, that caught a warm glow from the now westering sun. A brisk breeze had sprung up by this time from the north or north-west, driving the sea around them into a vivid blue; and far away beyond these lapping waters, on the shore, amid some soft green foliage, were two or three white dots of houses: these were the outskirts of Fort William.

While as yet they were a long way from the quay, he said—

"Your cousins have come down."

"Can you make them out at so great a distance?" she said, in some wonderment.

"Oh, well," he made answer, apologetically; "there are things that help you. I can see Miss Flora's sailor hat and dark dress. Then the tall lad by her side must be Hugh. Then the boy with the wheelbarrow—that, of course, is Johnny."

"But who is Johnny?" she asked, for she had no cousin of that name.

"Oh, you don't know Johnny? Johnny works in the garden, and sails the boat, and does anything else he is driven to do. Besides that, he is a person of the keenest sense of humour. I know what he is thinking of at this moment. He is looking at this steamer, and wishing she might go on the rocks."

"But why?" said Alison, with open eyes.

"That he might have the fun of seeing us all struggling in the water," her companion remarked, calmly. "He is really a very humorous lad. But I am afraid I shall have to make a horsewhip curl round Master Johnny's legs if he doesn't put some restraint on his passion for setting living things, no matter what, to fight each other. He is too anxious to get at the survival of the fittest all at once. Nature works by slow methods; Johnny is far too impatient. And then he has a habit of destroying the survivor—which is exceedingly unfair, and unphilosophical too."

"What an inhuman young wretch!" she said.

"Oh no. It's only his playful humour. He lives such a monotonous life—grubbing up weeds, sitting at the tiller, baiting night-lines, and so on. It is very hard. Here he has been several years in Fort William, and constantly in sight of the quay, and never once has a steamer burst her boilers and blown herself into the air. Well, now, will you come and show me your luggage? We shall be there directly."

Indeed there was little luggage to look after; and when Johnny came on board (Alison regarded this stout, heavy-shouldered lump of a boy, with his broad, grinning face, and small, twinkling eyes, and wondered whether he was thinking it would be an excellent joke to drop her portmanteau into the sea) her few things were speedily transferred ashore and put on the barrow. At the same time Alison, followed by the young man whose acquaintance she had made, passed along the gangway; and no sooner had she stepped on to the quay than she was caught hold of by her cousin (a handsome and strapping young lady this was, fresh-complexioned, with dark blue eyes and black hair; her costume of serge, with a straw hat showing a band of red ribbon) and heartily kissed on both cheeks and made welcome. It was a form of embrace unknown,

or at least not practised, in Kirk o' Shields; Alison was blushing a little as she released herself, and turned to her other cousin—a tall young lad of eighteen or twenty, who eyed her somewhat askance—and offered him her hand.

"I'm glad you got a good day for the sail," he said, rather bashfully. "I suppose you will go right on to the house now with Flora. Ludovick," he added, addressing the young man with the twisted yellow moustache and clear light eyes, "will you come along to the building-shed? I want you to look at the belaying-pins; I think Campbell has got them all wrong."

"Indeed no," said Miss Flora, promptly. "Ludovick is coming with us: aren't you, Ludovick? And—and this is my cousin, Alison——"

"We formed a little acquaintanceship on board the steamer," said he, pleasantly. "And I know Miss Blair's name; but I'm afraid she doesn't know mine."

"Alison," said Miss Flora at once, "let me introduce to you Captain Macdonell—a great friend of ours; that is why we asked him to look after you and see about your luggage, when we knew he was going down to Appin. Come, let us be off home; Aunt Gilchrist will be *wearying* for you, as she says. Look at Hugh!" the young lady continued, sending a farewell glance after her brother as they left the quay. "Isn't he glad to be rid of us! He thought I would insist on marching him back to tea; and of course he couldn't refuse, with his cousin just come ashore. But now he's off to stand about among damp shavings, and gaze and gaze at the wonderful boat that is all of his own designing. And precious glad he is to be rid of us girls, I know; oh, you'll find out soon enough, Alison, what he thinks of us all. Useless creatures, every one. We can't do anything right. We can't throw a stone straight; we can't sharpen a pencil, or shut a door, or do anything as it ought to be done; when we jump

from a wall we light on our heels; we can't trim a boat when she's sailing—goodness gracious! he shifts us about just as if we were ballast, and an ounce one way or another is all our fault; and we'd run away from a cow if it wasn't for shame. If you only knew the contempt he has for us! I wonder what he is thinking of you, Ludovick: you might be standing gazing at that marvellous boat instead of going home to drink tea with a lot of women."

"He'll pay for all this," Ludovick Macdonell observed, shrewdly. "He will sing another tune some day. All at once an angel will appear on earth—not from the clouds, but out of a finishing-school, most likely, and everything will be transformed and transfigured. And then to walk along the beach with her, her long yellow hair blown about by the sea-wind—just think of the magic of it; and the dreams of doing extraordinary things for her sake—becoming a great poet, or taking the Queen's prize at Wimbledon, or something of that kind. There will be no more contempt then—not at all; rather an indiscriminate affection and esteem for any one so privileged as to belong to the same sex as the wonderful and adorable creature——"

"No, no, no, Ludovick," said Miss Flora, shaking her head; "you will never find Hugh transmogrified like that. Ask his opinion of any girl, no matter who she is. If you say she has pretty fair hair, he says, 'Look at her piggy eyelashes.' If you say she sings well, he says, 'Yes, when by chance she hits the key.' If you praise her figure, he says, 'I hate draggle-tails; can't she use a needle and thread instead of fixing up her dress with a pin?' Fancy a boy noticing a thing like that! What business has he with pins and needles and thread, and sarcastic comments about mirrors and making-up? No, there is no beauty in us that he should desire us," she continued, with a careless—and probably inadvertent—use of Scriptural phraseology that considerably startled Alison. "We'll

have to set my cousin here to see if she can do anything with him; it is the quiet ones who do the most mischief."

By this time they had passed along the straggling street of the little town—with its whitewashed cottages, and small general stores, and banks, and inns, and churches—and were out in the southern suburbs, where a number of detached villas, set among pretty gardens, overlooked the beach. It was all a fairy-land to the wistful-eyed stranger from Kirk o' Shields—that beautiful panorama of sea, and wooded slopes, and far-reaching mountains; while here, close at hand, everything seemed so fresh and clean and bright in the sunlight, and the air was sweet with the scent blown from the gardens. At one of the small gates her companions stopped, and she was invited to enter. She passed in by a little gray-pebbled path, and found herself in a wilderness—in a very trim wilderness, it is true — of old-fashioned flowers: nasturtiums, dahlias, pansies, marigolds, all set in plots and borders: while, as she glanced towards the house, she perceived that the front wall of it was hanging with white roses and the pendulous crimson bells of the tree-fuchsia. But she had not much time to examine the villa itself—which was exceedingly smart, none the less, with its facings of brown stone, and its gables, and its green Venetian blinds; for in the porch, and smiling a blithe welcome, was the imperious little dame who had summoned her thither. When Alison went forward, she found herself seized by both hands, and held at arm's-length, by this bright-complexioned, silver-haired, pleasant-eyed small person, who subjected her to a keen and yet not unkindly scrutiny.

"And how's the bit lady?—let's see how she's looking," the old dame said, in accents that were more familiar to Alison than the gently modulated Highland speech; for Mrs. Gilchrist had lived many of the years of her life in Edinburgh. "Oh, none so ill, to have come out o' that

awfu' town—none so ill. I wonder ye can live in it at all; I never see it but I think o' the bad place. I'm sure if the bad place is any worse than Kirk o' Shields, I peety the poor folk that are to be sent there. And how's my brother-in-law the Minister, Alison?—and that frail-looking young lassie, your sister?"

"They're very well indeed, Aunt Gilchrist," Alison said. "And I am sure they thought it very kind of you to ask me to come and stay with you for a while."

"Yes; but did they *say* the like?" she said, with a laugh. "Na, na, they're dour folk in Kirk o' Shields; they dinna speak what's in their mind. And there you are, just as ever, you bigoted wee Puritan, with your stubborn gray eyes; and nothing in the wide world would induce you to say they sent me a friendly word or a message—though ye might tell a bit o' a white lee just for the sake o' civility."

"I am sure they thought it very kind of you all the same, Aunt Gilchrist," said Miss Dimity Puritan, "even if they didn't send you any formal message."

"Well, well, come indoors, or your Aunt Munro will be jealous. I think she has gone upstairs to see your things put right. Flora will show you the way—and there's to be tea in the back garden directly, as I hear."

"And I've brought you the illustrated papers, Mrs. Gilchrist," said the young militia captain, coming forward dutifully.

"Uncut, I suppose," said she, glancing at the bundle. "Well, Captain Ludovick, you and I will go away and take our places at the table; and then you can get a knife and cut the edges for me, for I'm a poor old woman, and hate trouble."

They passed through the house and into the back garden, where there was a round table covered with a white cloth, and amply bespread. All kinds of cake were there, and

soda-scones, short-bread, marmalade, black-currant jam, and the like: the Findon haddocks and the tea had not yet been summoned. This enclosed space behind the house sloped abruptly upward; and there was a winding path to the summit of the grassy knoll, where the afternoon sun burned in golden light; but down here there was a cool and pleasant shadow, and quietude for the eyes. However, Mrs. Gilchrist did not occupy herself with the illustrated papers when he had cut the edges for her.

"So you managed to make her out on board the steamer?" said she to the young man, who had laid aside his Tam o' Shanter—revealing thereby how light his complexion was; for there was a well-marked division between the clear hue of the upper portion of his forehead and that of the rest of his face, which was browned by the sun.

"Within two minutes of our leaving Appin pier," answered Captain Ludovick. "I recognized her the moment I saw her."

"And what do you think of her?"

"I think she is extremely pretty," said he.

"No, d'ye really think that!" said Aunt Gilchrist, with affected surprise; but the kind old dame's face had involuntarily lit up with pleasure at this praise of her *protégée*. "D'ye really think that now? For I shouldna have thought it was her good looks that would have recommended her to folk. She's got her mother's eyes, it is true; and there wasna a bonnier lass than my sister Ailie in a' the length and breadth o' Stirlingshire. And the bit creature has pretty hair too, if she wasna so prim about it. Flora will have to pull it about for her, and put her in the fashion. Maybe it's living in that bottomless pit o' a place that has kept her so pale; but it's a natural complexion too—mind that; it's no ill health—not a bit."

"I know this," said he, with some decision; "you may say what you please about her features, or her complexion,

or the colour of her hair, but one thing is certain, you would never pass her by unnoticed. There is something particularly distinguished about her—something unusual —something that tells you in a moment she is not like the other strangers who may be around her, on board a steamer or anywhere else. Perhaps it is the self-possession of her manner—a kind of dignity, and simplicity as well."

"Ay, do ye say that now?—do ye say that?" said the bright little dame, with much obvious pleasure. "Well, here she comes for herself. Here's my bit lady! Come away, you Lanarkshire lassie, and let's see whether the Highland air has made you hungry. Here, take this chair next me: that's where you're to sit whenever you and I are at the same table. And if your Aunt Munro is jealous, you must just tell her that Highland kinship is stronger than Scotch, and that you've Highland blood in your veins, for all you were born in that wearyfu' hole o' fire and smoke."

"I'm sure, Jane," said Aunt Munro, who was a tall, bland, well-featured, Scotch-looking woman, with mild eyes, and an expression of great gentleness—"I'm sure, Jane, none of us will quarrel with you for being kind to Alison."

And very kind, indeed, they all of them were to her; and a very merry little party this was, assembled down here in the grateful shade, while the afternoon light shone yellow on the crest of the knoll above them. The old lady was in especially gay spirits. Perhaps she was pleased that her *protégée* had won the high approval of the only stranger who had as yet seen her; perhaps she was looking forward with much content to having this constant companion to pet and tyrannize over; at all events, she was very cheerful and merry, and full of quips and jests and good-humoured raillery. And most of all did her gibes fall on the absent Doctor.

"Oh, they're fine fellows, they doctors, with their long words that they hide themselves behind. That's how they escape; when you've got them in a corner, and bade them declare their ignorance, they just jump through a big door and shut it in your face—a big door of three or four syllables, in Latin or Greek, and there you're left helpless. Look at me, Alison Blair. How big am I? I couldn't take a prize at a show of dolls! But bless ye, this braw doctor of an uncle o' yours would make ye believe I had a whole pharmacopœia of ailments in my wee body. I have a bit twinge in my toes sometimes, or along my fingers—just nothing it is—but you should hear the Doctor! It's peripheral neuralgia one day; it's neureetis the next; and rheumatic gout the next; and I'm not to take this and I'm not to take that—especially sugar. Alison, reach me the bowl."

Alison passed the sugar-bowl to the old lady, who forthwith took out a goodly piece, and with a determined air plumped it into the large cup of tea before her.

"That's for periphery!" she said.

She took out another piece and plumped it in.

"And *that's* for neureetis!" she said.

She took a third piece and plumped it in.

"And *that's* for rheumatic gout—and my compliments to the whole three o' them!"

"Well, Aunt Gilchrist," said Flora's mother, with a good-natured smile, "I don't think it's the sugar the Doctor objects to as much as the port-wine. But ye may say what ye like of him, for if he is my husband, he is your brother."

"Oh, he's an honest man, the Doctor—as far as a doctor can be," said Aunt Gilchrist. "And I'm thinking, Alison, you and I will be for taking him away from his patients for a day or two now and again—*to give the* poor creatures a chance of getting better. There's many

a fine drive about here, and Mr. Carmichael has a most comfortable waggonette; and we must take ye down Glenfinnan, and show ye where Prince Charlie first met the clans; and out to Spean Bridge too, and up Glen Nevis. It's a grand place, Fort William, for being in the middle of things. And then some day we must have a sail up the Caledonian Canal to Inverness; and there I'll get ye a brooch of Scotch pebbles, or cairngorms, or something of that kind, for your neck. Black and white's very trim and neat—oh yes, I find no fault; very prim and trim and nice ye look; but it's not enough for a young lassie. Flora will come with us, and we'll get you some pretty ribbons and neckerchiefs and things to busk ye up a bit."

Indeed she was just full of all kinds of generous schemes and projects; and though Alison was the chief figure in them, the old lady had a thought for her other relations as well. Flora was to have this and that; she would bring Hugh a book of salmon-flies; she even meant to surprise the Doctor with a present of a silver-headed walking-stick, with a snuff-box in the head; and finally she bade the young folk go away and amuse themselves, warning Alison to come back with a good appetite for the nine-o'clock supper, for the Doctor would be present with his severely scrutinizing eye.

"And now, Ludovick," said Flora, when the three younger people (Hugh had gone off to his studies) passed through the house, and were in the front garden, "what are we to do?"

"We can't go sailing, that is very certain," said he, looking away across the still sea-loch towards Stroncreggan and Conaglen.

Certain enough it was; for the afternoon had settled down into an absolute calm, and the water was like glass. The various features of the hills and mountains opposite

were all repeated on the flawless mirror; and in the midst of this inverted world floated motionless a schooner-yacht, a brown-sailed smack, and a steam-launch—the yellow masts of the schooner and the white funnel of the launch sending long reflections down until they almost touched the shore. Sailing was out of the question.

"Then let us show Alison Fort William," said Flora. "She ought to begin at the beginning. She hasn't seen half the place yet." So the three of them stepped down into the road and set out for the town; the golden afternoon shining all around them; the still air warm, and sweet with the fragrance of these suburban gardens.

Peace reigns in Fort William now. Lochiel has no trouble with his clansmen; the Government have no trouble with Lochiel; the garrison buildings have been turned into private dwellings; women sit on the grassy bastions of the fort and knit stockings, sheltering themselves from the sun with an old umbrella; in the square are wooden benches for looking on at the tossing of the caber, putting the stone, and other Highland games; in the fosse is grown an excellent crop of potatoes and cabbages; and just outside there is a trimly kept bowling-green, in which the club-members practise the gentle art of reaching the tee when the waning afternoon releases them from their desk or counter. Indeed it is possible that Alison, who had visited Edinburgh once or twice, and had passed the lofty crags and castle walls of Stirling, may have been disappointed to find a place of fair historic fame with so little to show for itself; but if Fort William is not in itself picturesque, it is in the very midst of wonderfully picturesque surroundings. When they took her along to "the Craigs," and ascended the mound there, she was struck dumb by the singular and varied and luminous beauty of the vast panorama extending away in every direction. The wild hills of

Lochaber were all aflame in the sunset light; dark amid trees stood the ruins of Inverlochy Castle; the shallow waters before her stretched away up to Corpach, where a flood of golden radiance came pouring out of Loch Eil; while all along the west, and as far south as Ardgour, the mountains were deepening and deepening in shadow, making the glow in the sky overhead all the more dazzlingly brilliant. Alison, standing somewhat apart from her companions, and wholly silent and absent, was wistfully wishing that her younger sister could be here for but an hour, for but a moment. Would it not enrich those pale visions of hers which formed so large a portion of her life? Perhaps her imagination was starved in so cold and colourless a place as Kirk o' Shields? And might there not be in heaven high hills like these, flame-smitten with rose and gold, and placid lakes reflecting their awful and silent splendour? The Lord had made man in His own image; was it not possible that in fashioning the earth He had given us glimpses of that distant and mystic region which to poor Agnes seemed so white and wan? Why should it be white and wan? The Lord was the King of glory. "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle." Some strange kind of exaltation filled her heart, and flooded her eyes with tears. Those roseate summits seemed so far away; they were hardly of this earth; they were God's footstool, removed beyond the habitations and the knowledge of men. "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?" When her cousin Flora came quickly forward in alarm, for she had happened to see the tears running down the girl's face, she found Alison all trembling, and quite unable to speak.

"Why, what is the matter?" said she, and she put

her arm within Alison's arm; and perhaps she guessed a little. "Come, come," said she kindly, "you must not let a pretty evening in the Highlands bewilder you. I'm sure I beg your pardon for leaving you to yourself for a minute or two: Ludovick and I are so deeply interested about our new tennis-court. Come away, and we will show you the river Nevis; and then we shall have to be back in good time for supper, you know, or else both papa and Aunt Gilchrist will be for tearing us in pieces." And so she led Alison away, and talked to her unceasingly, with plenty of help from Captain Macdonell; so that long before they had returned to the house the girl had quite recovered her ordinary serenity, and was listening with an equal amount of amusement and of horror to a recital of some of the doings of the boy John.

But, as it happened, they had lingered so long by the banks of the clear-running Nevis, that when they reached home again they were no less than ten minutes late; and the reception they got—not from the mild-eyed and soft-mannered Mrs. Munro, nor yet from the little, prim, gray-whiskered Doctor, but from Aunt Gilchrist herself—was of the sharpest. She who had been all milk-and-honey in the afternoon was now a fiery little scorpion; and no one was safe from her grumblings and mutterings and biting innuendoes. It was not only the real culprits who suffered, as they all sat down at table; there was a thrust here and a thrust there; nothing, indeed, in the town of Fort William was right; there were not even two clocks in the place that kept the same time. For a while the little Doctor fretted and fumed in silence; at length he said, petulantly—

"I wish, Jane, you would pay some heed to what one tells you, and get rid of that neureetis; for as long as it keeps hanging about ye, ye do nothing but grumble at the whole mortal world."

"Get rid of it!" she said, with bitter scorn. "Yes, if you can tell me what it is, and what brought it there, and what's going to cure it! The more o' that poison o' yours I take—your iodides and salicine and stuff—the worse it gets; and then ye jink round the corner and call it by another name. I wonder," she went on contemptuously, "ye havena tried conjuring, or spirit-rapping, or reading a verse of the Bible backward! What kind o' tune is it they whistle to make serpents dance? Could ye no try that, Duncan, my man, when your bits o' bottles three times a day winna help?"

"If you'd take your medicine," said he, with some acerbity, "and leave alone that port-wine negus and cinnamon and sugar, you'd have a better chance of getting well—ay, and of improving your temper besides, Aunt Gilchrist, let me tell you."

"And if I have found out the only thing that gives me a little relief, I'm sure it was no doctor who made the discovery for me!" she retorted.

"I should think not!" he said, with glooming brows. "He that will to Cupar maun to Cupar. And the relief you get at the time, or fancy you get, d'you no think you'll have to pay for that? What are you laying up for yourself?"

"What am I laying up for myself?" she answered snappishly. "'Deed, man, ye talk as if I was going to live for another half-century! Laying up for myself? I dinna care what I'm laying up for myself, so that I can get an occasional five minutes' peace and quiet; and that I have never got from any of your precious tablespoonfuls three times a day. Laying up for myself? Would ye talk like that if ye felt the whole o' your ten toes on fire, and more fire shooting across your ankles? I'm thinking, Duncan, my lad, ye'd be just as quick as any one to take whatever would still the pain; and ye'd not be so anxious

about squeezing in another miserable year or two between yourself and your coffin. And ye speak about my temper! My temper! Why, if ye get a bit twinge o' the toothache, it's like bringing the heavens and the earth to an end!"

She relapsed into silence and sulked. He also relapsed into silence and sulked; and what conversation ensued was carried on between Captain Macdonell and Flora and Hugh. Alison observed that her Aunt Munro, so far from betraying any embarrassment over this quarrelling, seemed rather to be amused, in her quiet way, and did not seek to interfere.

Now the nine-o'clock supper was the chief meal of the household—the Doctor being away most of the day, and uncertain as to his movements—and on the table there was a decanter of claret and also one of whiskey, while there was a jug of beer brought in for the two young men. When the question of drinking came along, Mrs. Munro pressed her sister-in-law to have some claret; but the offer was coldly, yet firmly, declined. Aunt Gilchrist would take a little water, please. The Doctor pretended to neither see nor hear.

"Duncan," said his wife, "it has been a long and a hot day for you; would you like some soda-water with your whiskey?"

He did not answer. He got up and rang the bell. A maid-servant appeared at the door.

"Catherine, bring some hot water—some boiling water—and some ground cinnamon, and a lemon."

Then he went to the sideboard and brought out a toddy-tumbler, a wineglass, and a dark bottle. Aunt Gilchrist would take no notice of his proceedings. Mrs. Munro was talking to Alison; Flora was talking to Ludovick Macdonell. And meanwhile, the servant having returned, the little Doctor standing at the sideboard was brewing a large beaker of port-wine negus.

Presently he brought the steaming tumbler, and the small silver ladle, and the wineglass round the table and put them before his sister.

"I will not take it!" she said shortly.

"Ye *will* take it!" said he.

"I tell ye, I will *not* take it!" she maintained fiercely.

"And I tell ye, ye *will* take it!" he insisted, with equal vehemence.

"I will *not* take it, not a drop, while I am in this house; and *that* will not be long!" said she, in a very high and mighty manner.

Alison left her seat, and came round and put her hand on her aunt's shoulder. The old dame shook her off.

"Go away!"

"Aunt Gilchrist!" said Alison.

The girl had a soft and winning voice. Aunt Gilchrist looked up for a moment and patted Alison's hand.

"Well, well, what is it? What does the bit lady want?"

"I want you to take the negus, Aunt Gilchrist," Alison said.

Aunt Gilchrist stared defiantly at her brother.

"He has put no sugar in it," said she.

The doctor went and fetched the sugar, and dropped one piece into the rose-coloured fluid.

"That's only for periphery," said she, discontentedly.

"Oh, well, you stiff-necked woman! there's another for deficient circulation, and here's another for muscular rheumatism: will that do for ye?" said he, with a constrained laugh; and when he had plumped the two pieces into the hot negus he went back to his place.

"They Highland folk!" said Mrs. Munro, with a quiet smile, to Alison. "Their temper is just like a pickle tow brought near a candle. Decent Scotch bodies like you

and me, Alison, try to keep some reasonable control over themselves."

Now, whether it was that this yielding on the part of her brother had pleased her, or whether it was that the stimulus of the hot negus did really afford her some assuagement of her wandering nerve-twinges, the old lady's mood was almost instantly changed. She grew most complacent and merry; she declared she would soon teach the Doctor how to cure nervous inflammation, so that neuritis and peripheral neuralgia and all the rest of the crew would simply fly at his approach—especially if he came with a tumbler of port-wine negus in his hand; she returned to the bold and generous undertakings and projects of the afternoon; and she challenged her brother to show his faith in his assistant by leaving him in full charge of the patients for a few days. When the supper-things were removed she insisted on Ludovick Macdonell lighting his pipe—which he was very loath to do, for no one smoked except himself; but she declared that the odour of tobacco in the evening was sweeter to her than the scent of roses, for it reminded her of happy days long gone by. And then (just as Alison was expecting to see "the books" brought in for family worship) Aunt Gilchrist announced in her tyrannical way that they must have a comfortable little game of "catch-the-ten."

"Aunt Gilchrist!" said Flora, with a laugh, by way of protest.

"Well, then?"

"What will Miss Dimity Puritan say to our playing cards?" Flora asked, with a look at her cousin.

"The bit lady? Indeed I forgot!" said the old dame, glancing doubtfully across the table. "But never mind; we'll not ask her to play. Alison will come and sit by me, and I'll show her the game."

And so it was that Alison (though with some compunc-

tion, for she had been taught to regard "the devil's books" as one of Satan's most dangerous and deadly devices) found herself looking on at this game, which, after a little preliminary instruction as to the names and values of the cards, she managed to understand in a fashion. And not only was there no apparent wickedness, but she found herself equally amused and interested. In the very first hand it fell to her aunt's lot to hold the ten of trumps; and the various efforts made by the other players to seize this treasure Alison was sharp enough to guess at. What she did not know was that Ludovick Macdonell, who had a suspicion as to where the Ten lay, intentionally and good-naturedly sacrificed his chance of capturing it by prematurely throwing away his Jack—to Aunt Gilchrist's exuberant joy and triumph—for ultimately she won the game. This evening Alison kept out—pleading her ignorance; but she was a reasonable and even a clear-headed kind of creature, when she was withdrawn from certain surroundings and influences; and she could not, for the life of her, make out wherein lay the harm of this simple pastime. For the rest, a great cheerfulness and frankness and good-humour prevailed in the little circle; it was astonishing how quickly the time went by; she was quite startled and sorry when Captain Ludovick, at the end of a game, rose and said he must really bid them good-night and be off to his hotel. Indeed she was disappointed: he seemed to belong to this household; she would rather he could have remained until the family party finally broke up.

As he was saying good-bye, and when he came to her, he took her hand for a second.

"I hope you will be pleased with your stay in Lochaber," he said.

"Ludovick," Miss Flora interposed, "you are not going back to Oyre just yet?"

"Oh no," he said, "not for a few days. I have some business that will keep me in the town."

"That's all right," said she at once, "for you can neglect your business, and come and help me to show Alison some of the places about. Hugh won't be bothered with us girls, so we shall have to depend on you."

"I'm sure I shall be delighted," said the young man; and then he bade them a general farewell again, and went out into the night—which was all throbbing with stars, above the black shadows of the hills.

CHAPTER III.

IN A CALDRON OF THE HILLS.

ALISON did not sleep much that night; she lay awake thinking of these kind people among whom she had come, of their frank and pleasant ways, their good-natured banter of each other, their affection, and their obvious desire that she should feel herself at home among them. And as for the only one of them who was a stranger to her—Captain Macdonell—she was resolved to place herself on very friendly terms with him, if he also was willing. From the "Ludovick" and "Flora" of their mode of address, and from his general footing in the house, it was clear to her that Captain Macdonell was her cousin's accepted lover; so that she—that is, Alison—could extend towards him a kind of sisterly familiarity without fear; and, besides, Flora would be pleased to find that her choice was thought much of and approved. That was one point. Then again she bethought her as to how she could manage to convince her aunt that it was not any hope of inheriting money that had brought her away from Kirk o' Shields, or had induced her to obey similar previous summonses. That she was to inherit Aunt Gilchrist's money was quite freely spoken of, by the old lady among the rest; and indeed Alison was not thinking much of herself in the matter; she was mostly anxious that none of them should imagine that her father had any mercenary end in view in consenting to these visits. But how was she to show her own independence, or his indif-

ference? If Aunt Gilchrist had been a purse-proud, overbearing woman, Alison could have faced her in battle-royal, and cut and slashed in scorn, and gone proudly home. But to face Aunt Gilchrist! She was the most whimsical of odd little tyrants. When she lashed, it was with a laugh. Her deadliest quarrels—with her brother—had only the tormenting of him for their aim. And as regards Alison herself, her treatment of "the bit lady" (except for an occasional snap when a sharper twinge than usual shot through her ankles) was just goodness itself. No, she could find no pretext for fighting Aunt Gilchrist; but the reflection was not a painful one; and it was with a pleased and dazed sense that under this roof there reigned a great good-will and content, and mutual and general kindness, that at last she fell asleep.

In her dreams she was back again in Kirk o' Shields. It seemed to her that she was lying awake in her own small room. Black night was all around, save for the lurid flames that shot up into the startled sky. She hardly dared stir or breathe, for might not her sister be listening for that strange visitant—the pale mother—who would come and stand by the bedside—smiling and benignant—seen and yet unsubstantial, heard and yet voiceless and noiseless? Was that a moan or wail coming from the room close by in which the servants slept? and was the poor creature Margaret, unable to close her eyes, torturing herself with thoughts of her eternal doom? This seemed to be a terrible night, so long, so sombre, so hopeless. For what was there to look forward to? The morning would but bring her the sight of a thousand chimneys vomiting smoke and fire into the surcharged and heavy air; bedraggled women, tired of face, and with shawls sheltering their head from the rain, would be trudging silent to their work; poor little brats, bare-

footed, would be making their way along the miry streets to school. Then all day long the clash and din and thud of engines; the air becoming thicker and thicker with poisonous fumes; the dusk coming on prematurely, and the flames of the furnaces showing redder and redder through the gathering darkness. Is it time for the books now? It is enough to make one's heart bleed to hear this poor woman praising the Lord for all His goodness to her, and to know that she is looking forward to an eternity of punishment. But soon she will have retired for the night; and may a merciful Heaven grant her some brief spell of forgetfulness—this poor Margaret, with the saddened eyes! Or is it only His beloved to whom He giveth sleep? For those others—the hapless lost ones—for them the worm that dieth not, and the fire that shall not be quenched.

Alison awoke with a cry. But what was this? Black night was no longer around her, with lowering skies and lurid flames; Kirk o' Shields had vanished; the solitary window of this neat, small room had grown to be of a beautiful, pale, bluish-gray. The dawn had come, silent and mystical. A flood of joy and peace and gratitude filled her heart; the day before her had no further dread for her; the fair world would once more be shining all around her, a gladness and a wonder to her eyes. Nay, even now, before any in the house were up, might she not make assurance doubly sure that all these visions and terrors were fled, and the new, calm day arrived, with its beneficent beauty and stillness? She stealthily rose, and got hold of a light travelling cloak, which she flung round her shoulders; then she went to the window and removed the small muslin sash, and drew a chair into the embrasure, and sat down there. She seemed to hold her breath as she looked forth. The night was gone, but the day was not yet here; all things looked ghostly and pale and

strange; the motionless waters of the lake, the wooded hills, the wan heavens themselves were as if they slept—as if they had slept, even as they were now, since creation's morn. Nothing stirred; there was not a sound. On the calm bosom of the water the dark-green fir-woods of the opposite shore and the pale lilac heights above them were faithfully reflected—except where some long and shallow banks showed in orange seaweed above the surface. A small scarlet object far away floated double on this liquid plain; she guessed that it might be a buoy to mark the steamers' course. A faint mist that hung about the woods appeared to be lessening—that was the only sign of change, and of the slow progress of the hours.

But as she sat there alone, and more than content, a transformation was taking place that at first she did not perceive. There was no archangel's trump to declare the daybreak; it came all so silently; the hill-tops had been touched by the rosy light ere she was aware. And then she looked up. Above the dark-green woods, above the purple slopes and shoulders, the far-receding summits were bathed in a faint ethereal crimson, and the heavens overhead were of gold. The whole world seemed to grow warmer. There were intermingling colours on the wide waters of the lake. What was this sudden cry, too, startling the silence? A sea-swallow had struck down upon that glassy plain, emerging with its prey in its beak; its companions came screaming and dipping and flashing around it. The new day broadened and descended from the hills; the sunlight fell upon the fir-woods opposite; far away in the north a small red object, leaving a brown trail behind it, began to move slowly along: was that the great steamer, with its scarlet funnels, coming south? She heard sounds below; the household was stirring. And then she stole quickly back to bed again, lest her cousin Flora should come to seek her; but her closed eyes

still beheld the beauty and the majesty and the wistfulness of that silent dawn, that seemed to have belonged to herself alone.

And it was Flora, as it chanced, who first came to call her; the young lady appearing at the door of the room with a telegram in her hand.

"Look at this now, Alison; was there ever anything so unfortunate!" said she (and it was only when she was excited or unusually emphatic that a trace of Highland accent was heard in her speech: she said, "Was there effer anything so unfhortunate!").

Then it turned out that certain friends from the south had telegraphed that they would reach Ballachulish that afternoon, on their way to Tyndrum next day; and that they hoped Flora and Hugh would come down and spend the evening with them. They were almost bound to go, Flora explained; but how could she leave her cousin just as she had arrived? Alison assured her that she need have no scruple. What was a single day? Besides, it was her—Alison's—place to remain with her aunt, and try to amuse her a little; she would have plenty of occupation till the two cousins returned from Ballachulish.

But Aunt Gilchrist was of a different mind, when, the brother and sister being ready to start for the steamer, Alison proposed to remain in the house and help her aunt with her sewing, or read to her, or otherwise wait on her.

"Read to me!" exclaimed the old lady, who had been peevishly grumbling all through breakfast-time. "Do ye want your head snapped off? If they fools o' doctors cannot get this wretched thing out o' my old bones—or nerves, or muscles, or whatever it is—why should you suffer, you stupid creature? Do ye want to be torn in bits?"

"I'm not afraid, Aunt Gilchrist," said Alison, with a smile—and when she smiled she showed she had exceedingly pretty teeth, as Flora noticed.

"Go away!" continued the old lady, with a sour face. "Go down to the quay with Hugh and Flora, and see them leave; then be off by yourself, and keep out o' my reach till the afternoon: I've not taken a drop o' their poisonous iodides this morning, so I may be better by then, and we'll go for a drive. Now be off with ye, and not another word."

Alison did as she was bid; and having seen her cousins leave by the steamer, she returned to the main street of the little town, and idly passed along that, looking at the small shop-windows and their modest displays. She had no definite idea of where she was going, but she naturally followed the route with which she was already familiar. She passed the fort. She left the last of the villas behind, and went away along the dusty road until she reached the banks of the river Nevis; and here she lingered and loitered from time to time as an opening among the thick foliage of overhanging ash and alder and sycamore enabled her to look down into the clear-running stream. It was with an inexpressible wonder and delight that she regarded the loveliness of these banks, and listened to the soft, continuous murmur of the river. The only waters she knew in Kirk o' Shields were, first of all, the canal—which seemed merely an intensification of all the surrounding squalor; and, secondly, a little burn which ran through a deep chasm some five or six miles away: the chasm itself was picturesque enough, but all its foliage was blighted and blackened, and the sluggish burn at the foot was of the colour of mud as it wound its way out into the grimy and melancholy fields. But look at this stream here—where the sunlight found an opening through the trees, and flashed a million diamonds upon the laughing ripples. The water was of the clearest golden-brown; she could see the colour of every red and olive-green pebble at the bottom. The overhanging branches, too,

that trembled in the warm sunlight were of a bright and beautiful, sometimes of a translucent, green. And this pleasant, murmuring music had no kind of sadness in it; it was cheerful—as the sunlight, and the fresh colours, and the sweet air all around her were: she wished that Agnes were here, if only for one brief minute, to see and to hear.

She was wandering along idly enough, at peace with all the world, and well content with the solitariness, and the sunlight, and the placid murmur of the river, when she became aware that some one was behind her and overtaking her.

"Good morning, Miss Blair!"

She recognized the voice at once, and she turned forthwith to give Captain Macdonell a friendly welcome. She was not in the least confused. He was a companionable kind of person—simple, off-hand, good-natured in his manner, and there was a bright confidence in his look that commended him; besides, for Flora's sake, she wanted to be specially kind to Captain Ludovick.

"I saw you from the window of my hotel," he said without more ado; "and as soon as I could get rid of the man with whom I was engaged I followed you. Do you want a guide? Are you going up the Ben? I heard that Flora and Hugh had gone South, and I was coming along to offer my services, if I had not seen you go by."

She told him she had no idea of going up Ben Nevis; she had only come out for a bit of a stroll.

"Yes, of course," said he. "You mustn't attempt Ben Nevis until you get a little used to hill-climbing. I'll tell you what we'll do; we'll get a couple of ponies some evening, if this fine weather lasts, and you and Flora will ride to the top, and Hugh and I will go with you, and Johnny to bring the ponies down. Then you'll stay the night at the little wooden caravanserai, to get up in the

morning to see the sun rise out of the German Ocean. How will that do?"

"I never was on horseback in my life," said she, somewhat aghast.

"Oh, but that's all right," said he. "You'll hold on; you've merely to lean well forward at the steep places. Well, now, where are you going at present? Would you like to try a bit of the hill by way of experiment? Suppose we go along, and I will show you the old track for ascending the hill before they cut the pony-track."

So these two went on together, she accepting his escort quite naturally; and she was resolved on the first opportunity to say something very pretty about Flora, so as to please him. But she did not get the chance—at least, not then. He was in a very gay and talkative mood, and was doing his best to interest and amuse her, and to instruct her too.

"Oh yes," he was saying, in answer to some chance remark of hers, "all this is very pretty—very beautiful, if you like. But it isn't Lochaber at all. Lochaber is wild. These hills just now are like the hills you see from the Nile—pale chromo-lithographs; that isn't Lochaber. You want to see this neighbourhood after a couple of days of Atlantic squalls—with heavy purple clouds and brilliant lights flashing about. You should get Hugh to talk to you about that——"

She glanced up with a little surprise.

"Ah, you don't know Hugh yet, I should imagine," said he. "He is a little shy. But he is a very extraordinary lad; he has all the Celtic sensitiveness to what is fine in music and painting and poetry; he seems to know by instinct what is right; and Flora has a good deal of the same quality too. It isn't that they themselves try to do much; but their appreciation of what is *most* beautiful, of what is best in all the arts, seems to be so marvellous;

it seems to be some kind of sixth sense; I don't understand it myself, but I can see how true and fine their judgment is——"

"But you are Highland too, are you not?" Alison said gently.

"Oh, I am a duffer," said he quite simply, as they walked along; "and it's a good, wholesome thing, when you are a duffer, to know it. But that fellow Hugh—why, he does all sorts of things by a kind of instinct. You wouldn't think he was a bundle of nerves, would you?—he's as strong as a young colt. But if you're driving with him, he's the first to tell if anything goes wrong with the springs, and he's the first to notice if the horse goes a bit lame. I declare to you he can sail a boat better than I can, and I've been at it all my life, and he has spent half his time in Edinburgh at his classes. It's some nicety of touch he's got—all the way round; you should see him throw a cast of trout-flies on to smooth water, or screw a ball over a tennis-net. And his sister has a great deal of the same faculty, though of course she has not tried her hand at so many different things. You wouldn't think she was very sensitive to impressions, would you? You might even," he added, rather turning to his companion and regarding her—"you might even say she was a trifle careless—and—and robust—even mannish—in her ways?"

"But surely," said Alison, with the blood mantling in her cheeks (for now was her chance)—"surely that very frankness comes from her honesty, and her good-nature, and her kind intention towards you? Surely that is so!"

"Yes, I think it is," he said, but not so warmly as Alison could have wished; "I think she always means well, and knows it, and is not very particular about people's opinion of her. However, she seems to have quite the same instinctive appreciation that he has of

what is fine in music, or in poetry, or in the colour of a bit of silk, for the matter of that. Neither the one nor the other professes to sing, you know; you couldn't persuade them to try a song indoors, before strangers at least; but if you are out in a boat with them in the evening, and one or the other begins with some of the old Gaelic airs, then you never heard two voices in your life that went together with such a singular harmony. There is no effort; they don't seem to care; sometimes he sings second to her, sometimes she sings second to him; and it is a fragmentary kind of thing—a line of a verse, or merely the humming of a tune. Sometimes I think he should have been trained as a musician."

"And yet he is going to be an architect?" said she.

He noticed the touch of surprise, perhaps of disappointment, in her tone.

"Oh, but you must get Hugh in a confidential mood, and then he will show to you that architecture is the noblest of all the arts; and not only so, but that it combines all the others. However, it isn't to everybody he confides his ambitions. For my part, I believe there are the makings of a very great man in that lad, though he is just now entirely occupied in building a jib and mainsail sailing-boat. Yes; I'm looking forward to the time when I shall be a broken-down old Highland laird, with a snuff-box and an old collie as my chief companions, and Hugh Munro will be away in the South, one of the great men of the world, building monuments that will preserve his name for centuries. You don't see much in Hugh, perhaps?—he's shy; but I know I am right."

By this time they were crossing a wide stretch of undulating moorland, following a path marked here and there by a bit of smooth-worn rock, and here and there by a few scattered stones among the tufts of coarse grass and heather. Far above them towered the mighty bulk of the

Ben—what they could see of it, that is—the massive shoulders seamed with deep scars, the lilac-gray rocks wet in places and glittering in the sun. He was walking at a studiously moderate pace, to encourage her; every now and again he would stop for half a second, that they might go on together.

"You must tell me," said he, "not when you are tired, but when you think you are beginning to be tired—then we will turn."

"But I am a very good walker," she made answer. "At Kirk o' Shields, if you want to see a few green leaves and bushes—and they are not very green, poor things—or if you want to hunt for a primrose in the spring-time, you've got to walk away out to Kirtle Burn, nearly six miles off. That is a good walk, there and back."

"You ought to drive there and back, and have all your time at the place: wouldn't that be more sensible?" he suggested.

"At Kirk o' Shields no one ever drives, except to a funeral," said Alison quite simply, and without being in the least aware of the grimness of her answer.

They were now ascending the lower slopes of the mountain, and she was doing excellently well under his careful encouragement and supervision.

"I shouldn't wonder if we got as far as the tarn," said he cheerfully, "and I should consider that a very creditable performance for a first attempt."

"If I can get up so far," said she, laughing, but pausing to take breath all the same, "that will be all right; for we're bound to get down somehow."

"Well, you've done enough for the present; you must rest for a few minutes now," said he; and he chose out a dry hillock where she could have a comfortable seat.

He sat down beside her. They were now at a consider-

able height, and there was a spacious view before them, across the wide, undulating country to the long ranges of hills in the north. And truly there was not much of wild Lochaber about the still, beautiful, soft-tinted picture: those far hills of faint rose-purple were about as pale in hue and as ethereal as the sky immediately over their summits.

"I hope you will get a day like this," said he, "if your Aunt Gilchrist should think of driving you over to Oyre."

"To——"

"To Oyre—that is my father's place," he explained. "And I hope you will pay us a little visit. I should like you to see my father; why, you cannot go away from the Highlands without having seen the last of the old Highland gentlemen."

She looked up, a little astonished, and he smiled.

"That is what Hugh and Flora call him; but I think it would be better to say the last of the old-fashioned Highland gentlemen. Yes, he is of the old school entirely; and so is the house, and so are all his belongings. He won't part with anybody who has been years in his service; no, nor with any horse or dog that has done good work for him: it's a rare hospital for incurables that we have at Oyre. And, as you may imagine, the old gentleman is greatly given to praising past times, and magnifying the joy that used to exist then. You see, he remembers the *Ceilidh*. The *Ceilidh*," he continued—and he was carelessly pulling a twig of heather now and again, and she was contentedly listening, for his voice was pleasant to hear, and that was a beautiful, distant panorama spread out all before her, and the very solitude was a grateful kind of thing—"well, that is only the Gaelic word for a visit; but it used to be the custom for the young girls of a village to meet at a particular house in the even-

ing, and take their work with them, and then the young men would come in, naturally, and there would be songs and stories, and often a little dancing, to the sound of the pipes. It was all very harmless and innocent; and if a young man could compose a good song about his sweetheart, there was his chance; and if one could play the pipes well, or tell a thrilling ghost story, there was the chance too. But nowadays, where is all that gone? My father will tell you that it is the Free Church that has taken the heart and soul out of the life of the Highlanders."

She started as he spoke, but he did not notice.

"No more music, no more singing, no more dancing, no rational enjoyment whatever—that's the programme," he went on, all unwittingly. "If a visit is paid to any one in the village, it is to talk about saving grace and the carnality of works—that's the *Ceilidh* nowadays! Why, some of the militia lads, who come over from the outlying islands, are just like to go mad when they hear the pipes. The pipes are forbidden in nearly all the islands now: the Free Kirk ministers will have nothing more wildly hilarious than the Jew's-harp, if the young folks must have music. Really one loses patience to see a simple and generous and naturally light-hearted people tyrannized over by a set of men who are ignorant, ill-educated, narrow-minded, without any knowledge of the world whatever, and with no more understanding of human nature than a cow has of algebra——"

But here he laughed at his own vehemence.

"You will think I have put on my father's mantle," said he; "and yet I confess it does make me feel a little wild to see one of those illiterate, ill-conditioned boors become the spiritual master of a whole community of Highlanders—who are at heart gentlemen. Sometimes," he continued (and he was far too much engaged with

those twigs of heather to notice the expression of his companion's face), "I am extremely happy to say, one of them gets hoist with his own petard. I know of a parish where the crofters were not so badly off, as things go; but this fellow came among them, sowing ill-will, talking about tyranny and slavery and all the rest; and at last he got what he wanted—they chose him to be their minister; and there he was installed as the champion of the rights of the people. But his popularity did not last very long. He was so inconsistent as to complain to the policeman that somebody had stolen his gooseberries, and also that some other person had actually opened his gate and driven a cart across his field by way of a short cut; whereupon he was immediately and angrily denounced by his congregation as an aristocrat, a landowner, and an enemy of the poor; and when the Sustentation Fund collectors went round, they came back with empty books—nobody would subscribe a blessed farthing. Oh yes, they're a set of nice, pleasant, peace-making, considerate, gentlemanly fellows, those Free Kirk ministers!" said this young man. "I suppose your father doesn't come much in contact with them, Miss Blair? He is a clergyman, is he not?"

"My father is a Free Church minister," Alison said quietly.

Then young Macdonell leaped to his feet as though he had been shot through the heart; and his handsome face, that ordinarily shone with a sunny good-humour and gaiety, was hot and red with bitter mortification.

"It's true what they say," he exclaimed, as if he were gnashing the words between his teeth, "that the sons of the Highlanders are not as their fathers were. My father would have made no such mistake. He would have found out before uttering a word. Miss Blair, how am I to ask your pardon?"

His distress—his humiliation—his abject self-abasement —was quite painful to witness; and Alison, looking up for a moment with her honest, clear gray eyes, was all anxiety to say a few reassuring words to him.

"But why should you think you have offended me?" she asked, in her gentle way—and she was looking down again now. "I don't know anything about the Free Church ministers in the Highlands. Perhaps what you say of them is true; and if it is true, why should it not be said and known?"

"But I had no idea your father was a Free Church minister," he exclaimed.

"Of course I knew that," said she, in the most friendly fashion possible. "And I am sure of this too, that if you knew my father you would not include him among the stirrers-up of ill-will and dissension. He is strict in his ideas of what the conduct of a professed Christian should be; yes, and a little old-fashioned, too, perhaps, about many observances; but I think if you knew him you would respect and honour him for the very way in which he clings to the customs of his forefathers. I suppose you never heard of the Blairs of Moss-end?"

She looked up with a quiet smile.

"N—no, I'm afraid not," he admitted.

"Nor of Adam Blair, the famous Seceder?" she continued; and there was some amusement in her eyes as she thus proclaimed her pride of ancestry. "I suppose not. But our family are descendants of his; and, of course, *noblesse oblige:* we have to maintain our own principles and practice, whatever our neighbours may do."

Indeed she was obviously bent on removing the chagrin that was still visible in the young man's face; and when they again set forth to breast the steep incline, she proceeded to tell him some stories of those Blairs of former

days, which seemed to suggest that, however austere in piety they may have been, they could also exhibit a grim sort of humour on occasion. But the memory of his grievous blunder was not yet gone from him. He was rather silent. She had to do nearly the whole of the talking—which was grossly unfair, for she needed all the breath she could get for her climbing; while he stepped from tuft to tuft, or from stone to stone, with the greatest possible ease. When she subsequently asked Hugh Munro what would have happened if her walking powers had given out, and she had had to succumb, he said—

"What—and Ludovick with you! Did you ever look at his shoulders! Did you ever see him catch hold of an anchor-chain, and give a haul with those arms of his? He could have carried you all the way up, and carried you all the way down, and thought nothing at all about it!"

At length, after what seemed to her a good deal of laborious work—although he lent her a helping hand whenever there was any excuse for doing so—they reached the level and marshy plateau in which lies the solitary little lake already referred to; and then he asked her whether she thought she could hold out if they crossed the mountain and struck down the other side, getting home by Glen Nevis.

"Couldn't we get to the top first?" said she boldly, glancing up to the far-receding heights overhead.

He laughed, but he seemed to approve her courage all the same.

"No, no," said he; "you are not anywhere near the top yet; and it becomes very steep after you leave the tarn. We shall do very well if we get back by Glen Nevis. Besides," he added, looking all around, "there's something queer—don't you notice how dark it is getting?"

"Yes; it is dark," said she.

"There's something gathering overhead, though where it can have come from I can't imagine; there was not a cloud in the sky when we started. Well, let us get along."

So they set out once more—he usually taking the lead, especially in the marshy places, and finding for her a safe and solid track; and she watching where he put his foot, and sometimes taking his hand to help her in a bit of a jump. All this time, however, the mysterious darkness around them was increasing. The lonely tarn over there seemed almost black. There was a sultry feeling in the air, and a sensation as though one could hear a great distance, though the silence was absolute.

All of a sudden she was startled by a short, sharp crack behind her, as though a pistol had been fired close to the back of her head; and as she wheeled round in dismay—to find nothing before her but this intensifying gloom—she could hear a thunderous rumbling go rolling and reverberating through the unknown deeps of the air, and dying away in lessening and ever-lessening echoes.

"That was pretty close by, though I did not see the flash," he said, with much composure. "We'd better push on quickly. If we can strike the path down to Glen Nevis before the rain begins, I know where there is a small wooden bridge where you will get shelter."

He had hardly spoken when a blinding glare of light shone all around them—a glare that showed them nothing but itself, for it blotted out the whole of the world from their bewildered eyes. Then came a startling rattle overhead—a quick succession of snaps and cracks, as if rocks were being rent and hurled against each other immediately above them; it was not until these appalling explosions had ceased that the muffled echoes, repeated and repeated, boomed and rolled away through the awe-stricken silence.

He regarded his companion. Her face was pale; but not paler than usual, he thought. Nay, the instant she noticed that he was looking her way she brightened up.

"Is this the wild Lochaber, then, that you wanted?"

"A thunder-storm is a thunder-storm anywhere," said he, "and I wish it had not caught you so far from home."

For the first heavy drops had begun to fall, and the darkness around them grew more intense. He stopped for a moment, and whipped off his jacket of rough home-spun.

"You must put this round your shoulders," said he, approaching her.

"Indeed I will not," she said emphatically. "Why should you get wet any more than I?"

"But you will—you must. Now don't argue like your Aunt Gilchrist and the Doctor, but be reasonable," he said; and he had never spoken to her like this before—exercising a kind of brotherly authority over her, as it were. Indeed he took possession of her. He slipped her arm into one of the sleeves, pulled on the coat, drew it round her, slipped in the other arm, and securely fastened the buttons in front, even to the upturned collar, which came round the lower part of her face. It was none too soon. The water was now coming down in sheets—a straight, resistless downpour, which seemed to spread a smoking vapour all around. He took her hand and led her onward, for the rain drowned her eyes. She followed him blindly, not caring now whether she reached dry footing or not, so long as she could keep up with him.

Then something happened that caused them both to stand stock-still, as if they had been paralyzed. There was another wild glare all around them, but in the midst of it there was a ball of fire—a ball of white fire that appeared to be hurled down to the ground just in front of them—and instantly there was a sudden, terrific, ear-

splitting rattle of sounds that seemed to shake the earth to its very foundations. Alison felt him let go her hand, and at the same moment perceived that he had dropped his stick on the heather, and was standing there uncertain. Then he began to press his arm, from the wrist up to the shoulder.

"What is it?" she cried in quick terror.

"Only a bit of an electric shock; there's no harm done,' he said, as he picked up his stick again. "I suppose this was the conductor——"

"Then why not throw it away?" she said instantly.

"I can't do that," he said; "my father gave it me more than a dozen years ago—on the day after I caught my first salmon. Come along; we must get out of this hollow cup as soon as we can."

So he caught hold of her hand again, and they set off. But the rain was now worse than ever, and seemed to press down the clouds and mist upon the ground so that she at least could make nothing of their whereabouts. He appeared to be leading her across a marshy and trackless and interminable waste, through white vapours surrounding them and shutting out all the rest of the universe. Fortunately they did not encounter any more fire-balls; their trouble now was merely those blinding sheets of water that seemed to cause the earth to smoke around them. As for their route, she was happily ignorant of any danger; she had never heard of people being lost on Ben Nevis; she took it for granted that her companion was familiar with every slope and corrie of these Lochaber hills, and trusted herself implicitly in his hands.

And yet she was glad enough to feel that they were at last beginning to descend from those solitary heights; and when eventually they struck a rude little path consisting of chipped rocks and stones, and when he told

her that this would lead them down to Glen Nevis, it was pleasant to know that there was a link connecting them with the world far below. Moreover, the rain was lessening now; the clouds were lifting; a warm glow as of sunshine was appearing through the "smurr;" finally a flood of golden light fell all around them, on the wet path, on the shining grass, on the silver-gray rocks. He took the soaking coat from off her shoulders and slung it over his arm. He was talking very cheerfully to her now, for this encounter with a thunder-storm in a caldron of the hills had driven his unhappy blunder of the morning out of his mind. And Miss Dimity Puritan was very cheerful too, smiling and showing the pretty dimple in her cheek; and declaring that her be-drenched and flaccid garments (which he studiously forbore from noticing) would be perfectly dry and comfortable long before they should get back to Fort William.

As they got farther and farther down into the lower world (and Alison found this descent over broken stones a far more trying operation than the previous climbing) the sunlight became hotter and hotter, until she rather envied her companion the coolness of his flannel sleeves. And where was there any sign of the storm through which they had passed? When at length they were descending into the beautiful valley of Glen Nevis—a sunny flash here and there upward through the overhanging foliage told her where the river wound its way down to the sea—he suddenly asked her to pause and listen. What was this sound, as yet distant and faint? Why, surely there was a reaping-machine at work somewhere in those fertile fields in the hollow of the glen?

"They've had no rain at all down here," said he.

"Then," said she, demurely regarding her drooping skirts, "they'll think I must have fallen into the river."

However, she was not to challenge the curiosity of the

Fort William folk in any such manner; for they were still outside the town when a friend of Captain Macdonell's came driving by in a dog-cart, and he was delighted to have Miss Blair take the seat beside him, where the apron in front afforded her all the concealment she wanted. In this wise she was driven home, and immediately retired to her own room, thoroughly tired out and aching considerably about the ankles, and yet glad enough to have met with this adventure now that it was all over.

For she had seen a good deal to-day of this young man, who was naturally an object of great interest to her, as likely to become a relative of hers. And in thinking back over all the things that had turned up in their conversation, what struck her as most peculiar was that he had been far more ready to speak about Hugh than about Flora, and that he expressed a much more enthusiastic appreciation of the brother than of the sister. Was it his modesty, then? She had always understood that a young man engaged to be married was for ever anxious to talk about his future bride, and to expatiate upon her various perfections and virtues and celestial attributes so long as there was left in the world one patient ear to listen. But perhaps (Alison finally said to herself) Captain Ludovick knew that Flora, who was an independent, proud-spirited, wilful kind of creature, would resent being made the subject of any such foolish and infatuated discourse; and perhaps it was really out of respect for her, and for her wishes, that he remained mostly silent.

CHAPTER IV.

JOHN.

NEXT morning, Aunt Gilchrist being still confined to her room by the super-sensitiveness of her toes and fingers, and Hugh and Flora not having yet returned from the South, Alison was again left to her own resources; and thus it was that she came to make the acquaintance of the boy John. The boy John, whose sole aim in life was to sneak out of the way and do absolutely nothing, was rather glad to have his idleness publicly recognized and condoned. He went about with Alison very willingly; and as he immediately discovered that she knew next to nothing of country life, he was soon engaged in imparting information to her about many other things besides the plants and flowers in the garden, of which he himself, by the way, was pretty ignorant. Alison listened in amazement, and with a little fear, to this lumbering lad, whose small, twinkling, shrewd eyes seemed to suggest that he was not quite such a fool as he looked. And yet she came to the conclusion that John's conception of the universe, and of his own position in it, was perfectly sincere. He appeared to take it for granted that all nature, animate and inanimate, was in a conspiracy to maim, injure, and destroy him, John; and that he, John, was therefore justified in taking his revenge beforehand, whenever he got the chance. Of course there was more than that. Sometimes, instead of merely killing them, you could outwit those malevolent creatures by which

you were surrounded. Ill-luck they meant you; but good-luck you might extort from them by the exercise of a superior cunning. Here, for example, as Alison and he were strolling about the back garden, they came upon a big black snail that had strayed on to the foot-path.

"Now, mem, now uss your chance!" John whispered eagerly, and he put his hand on her arm. "Quick, now —the little duffle he does not see us—his horns are out—quick, now, mem, grip him up by the horns and throw him over your left shoulder—oh, that will bring you plenty of money and good-luck!—plenty, plenty!"

"I would not touch the horrid beast for anything!" she exclaimed, with a shiver of disgust.

Seeing that, Johnny advanced by himself, knelt down, extended his hand warily—warily—and then made a sudden grab. But the horns were instantly gone. He got up, sullen and scowling.

"The little duffle!" he grumbled. "He wass only pretending not to see us. If I could get a big stone now, I would bash his head for him!"

"You will do nothing of the kind!" said Alison angrily.

And then Johnny grinned. He did not look further for a stone; he stooped and picked up the snail in his hand, and crept across the garden to the wall. On the other side, tethered in a bit of pasture, was a large she-goat, with magnificent horns and beard; and when this heavy-shouldered, broad-faced, lubberly gnome had reached the wall, he raised his head to the top, peeped over, flung the snail with all his might at old Nanny, and then came crouching back to Alison.

"Mebbe she'll eat the snail," said he, in great glee, "and it will kill her. Cosh, that would be fine!"

"Why, what harm has the poor old creature done you?" Alison demanded.

He looked at her; then he glanced at the stone wall, so as to make sure the old Nanny-goat should not overhear.

"Mebbe you'll not know," said he, pretending to whisper mysteriously, but his eyes were twinkling: she never knew but that he was making fun of her ignorance. "Do you not know where them beasts hef to go, once in effery year? They hef to go to the big Duffle himself, to get their beards combed; ay, that's a truth, now; effery year they hef to go, and the Duffle gets their beards combed for them. And who knows what they will bring back, and what they are thinking about, and what harm they can do to you, if you anger them? There's wild ones in Ardgour; and no one will go near the rocks where they are after dark; for they'll come behind you, and push you, and push you, down into the sea. Ay, and it's not any use firing at them either, even in the daytime; for the big Duffle he hass put something ofer them, and nothing will touch them. Cosh, I wonder if she hass eaten the snail!"

He was for sneaking back to the stone wall, but Alison impatiently called him away; and so he came and humbly accompanied her as before, only pausing now and again, when he managed to discover some pugnacious insect that he could worry into a display of its fierceness.

But Alison must have produced a most favourable impression upon Johnny's ingenuous mind, for it was entirely of his own accord that he asked her whether she would not go for a sail. Miss Flora and Mr. Hugh, he had heard, were coming back by the midday steamer; would the young lady not like to go in the boat to meet them? There was a nice breeze. Maybe they would get as far down as Corran? And, if not, they would have a sail whatever.

Alison (who rather wondered that Captain Macdonell

had not come along to say whether his arm had quite recovered from the electric shock of the previous day) at once assented; and Johnny led the way down to the shore, where he was not long in launching a small rowing-boat that was lying there. Moreover, the tide being a little way out, he generously offered, if she would but wait a minute or so, to hunt out two partans (by which he meant crabs), so that she might witness a combat between them; but she declined that amiable proposal; so he asked her to get into the stern of this rickety small craft, and he would pull her out to the sailing-boat, which was lying at her moorings. A few minutes thereafter Alison was on board, and securely seated in the little cockpit; while Johnny, forward on the deck, was hoisting the gaff of the main-sail with a vigour which showed that his constitutional aversion from work was not due to any want of muscle.

Now Alison was absolutely ignorant of everything connected with boats and sailing; while Johnny, on the other hand, took it for granted that she knew as much as any of the young people about, any one of whom, in going out for a sail, would naturally take the tiller, while he, Johnny, looked after the jib-sheets. Accordingly, when he had fastened the small boat to the moorings, and was ready to let the larger one go, he turned to see if she was ready. She was quietly regarding him.

"Will ye tek the tiller, mem?" he suggested.

"Oh yes," said she, with cheerful alacrity, "if you will show me what to do."

"Oh, well," said he, not at all suspecting her real ignorance, "I would keep her pretty close up: there's sometimes bad squahls on this loch."

Forthwith he let slip the moorings; then he turned round to see what his fellow-voyager was doing. She was doing nothing. The main-sail was flapping and rattling in

the wind, and the young lady was merely concerned in ducking her head under the swaying boom. Did she not understand, then, that the moorings had been cast off? He went down beside her, put the helm up a bit, slacked out the main-sheet, gave it one hitch round the pin, and handed it to her; then he surrendered the tiller.

"Ay, just keep her about that," said he; and then he went and stood on the deck by the side of the mast, which was his accustomed place when either Miss Flora or Mr. Hugh was sailing the boat.

And at first things went very well indeed; and no doubt Johnny was assured that the young lady could sail a boat just like any one else—probably better than himself, for he was not much of a hand at it. The brisk breeze that was blowing came almost straight up the loch; they had a long reach before having to go about; and it was with great surprise and delight that Alison found this bounding and living thing so completely under her control, obeying the smallest touch of the rudder, and yet ever cleaving an onward way and throwing sparkling white foam from the rising and dipping bows. She was not in the least afraid; she suspected no danger; she was exultant, rather, with this new-found joy of speeding through a world of dazzling sea and sunlight, herself the mistress of the mysterious power that was bearing her so swiftly along. She was more excited than she knew. When the wind struck down in a heavier gust than usual, the sudden "swish" of water all along the side of the boat was like music in her ears. And Master Johnny no doubt considered that they were doing splendidly, and making a very brave display, if anybody happened to be watching them from the distant shore.

But Master Johnny's serene confidence in his companion's seamanship was destined to be rudely shaken when it was time to go about.

"You may put her round now," said he, from his post by the mast.

"Yes?" said Alison inquiringly.

"Ay, you may put her about now," Johnny repeated.

"But what am I to do?" she called to him.

He turned and stared.

"Put the helm down," said he; we'll go about now."

And still she sat helpless, awaiting instructions, so that even Johnny must at last have perceived her appalling ignorance.

"Put the tiller aweh from you!" he called to her.

Poor Alison was all bewildered. She vaguely knew that something had gone wrong—that something was happening—and then that Johnny was down here in the cockpit, working quickly at the ropes—that the boom was over on the other side, and she holding the tiller with her other hand—and that presently they were sailing along, apparently with as much ease and comfort as before. As for Johnny, he could now make fast his lee jib-sheet; but it had been forcibly impressed on his youthful mind that his sole companion for the time being knew as much about sailing as he did of Greek.

And perhaps it was this discovery, coupled with the knowledge that he himself was but an indifferent hand, and was never allowed to go out in this boat unless there was some capable person on board, that served to unnerve him, just when coolness and self-command were most necessary. For the wind had freshened up considerably; and when they got farther and farther out into the middle of the loch it began to come along in swirling gusts that were extremely disconcerting. There was no plain sailing, no exultant joy, for Alison now. She could only sit clinging to the main-sheet, and watching the motion of

Johnny's hand as he directed her how to keep the tiller: the fact being that, although by this time he was quite aware of her absolute ignorance, he preferred not to take over the responsibility on to his own shoulders. And as his chief notion of safety, when those gusts came along, was to keep the boat close up, under Alison's inexperienced guidance she was continually staggering into the wind, and then being blown down on the other side, with a terrific rattle of the loose oars and spars on deck. He was in the cockpit by this time, attending to the main-sheet as occasion demanded; but he would not touch the tiller; that was the young lady's look-out: the truth is, he had lost his head altogether, and could only mutter to himself again and again, "That duffle of a wind!" He scowled as he looked down the loch. His malignant enemy was too strong for him; he could but bear those furious buffets, and wonder when they would cease. And sometimes he would try to escape. Taking advantage of a lull, he would let her head away a little; the shivering sails would instantly fill, and she would shoot forward willingly enough; then would come another tearing squall, driving the gunwale down into the seething water, and threatening to send the small craft and all its contents to the bottom. He had forgotten about the shore now, and about possible spectators. He was at the mercy of this wind-demon that struck and struck and was trying to send them over; and he could not strike in return, nor yet run away and hide: his enemy was his master now, and he was helpless.

He happened to look back, and towards the land.

"There's a boat coming out—is she mekking for us, do you think?" he said.

But how could Alison tell? Besides, she was too much engaged in clinging to her place, and also in doing what she could to prevent the wind from getting a grip of the

flapping and cracking sails. But John kept his eye upon that small cockle-shell in the distance; and at last he said, with an awe-stricken air—

"Cosh, it's Macdonell himself; and he'll be for giffing me an ahfu' licking!"

Alison turned quickly. She could see the small boat and its tiny white sail, and also a figure seated in the stern, but she could not make out who he was.

"Is that Captain Macdonell's boat, John?" she asked of him, amid this bewildering din of tumbling oars, and swinging spars, and creaking cordage.

"Tuz," said Johnny, in gloomy assent. And then he added (still bent on keeping her responsible), "Will I tek down the main-sail now, and wait for him?"

"I don't know; how should I know?" said Alison, who was rather bewildered. "Wait for him, did you say? Oh yes, certainly! If that is Captain Macdonell, certainly wait for him!"

"I'll tek down the main-sail whatever," said Johnny; and he went forward and loosed the halyards, and rattled down the main-sail and gaff upon the deck.

That small blue boat, with the tiny white lug-sail, was coming along in beautiful fashion, seeming to skim the crests of the waves like a sea-gull; and long before he was near, Alison had recognized—and recognized with heartfelt gratitude, and with a curious sense of trustfulness and security—that it was Ludovick Macdonell who was the solitary figure there. When he ran the little craft alongside he got to his feet, threw a line to Johnny, brailed up the sail, and leaped on board.

"Good morning, Miss Blair," said he very coolly. "I saw you were in a fix, and I thought I'd run out and lend you a hand. And you," he said, turning to the cowering Johnny, who regarded him with a furtive eye—"you've been making a nice exhibition of yourself, young shaver!

What were you doing? Did you want to send the boat to the bottom?"

"The wind wass blowing so hard," said Johnny sulkily; he guessed that the belabouring of his shoulders was but a question of a couple of minutes.

"Why didn't you take in a couple of reefs, then?" said Macdonell, who was getting his own small boat fastened securely astern.

"I could not reef the sail ahl by myself in them squahls," answered the youthful mariner, still plunged in apprehensive gloom.

"Then what prevented your hauling up the tack, and running away back to the quay?"

"She wanted to go on," said Johnny, at a venture; and "she," being thus in a measure appealed to, thought she ought to interfere.

"Indeed the whole fault is mine, Captain Macdonell," Alison said. "I have no doubt Johnny imagined I could help in sailing the boat—and I don't know anything about it—and since it came on to blow so hard I am sure he has done everything he could think of."

"But what brought you out here? Where were you going?" he asked in amazement.

"We thought we might go down and meet Flora and Hugh," she said. "But it was only a fancy. Shall we go back? Is there any danger?"

"I will take very good care there won't be any danger now," he made answer, confidently enough; "but once or twice I thought you were over—I did indeed. It was two men on the shore who happened to catch sight of you; and when they called to me, and I saw the trouble you were in, I bolted through the town, and put out in the little *Blue-Bell*—none too soon, as I think. Here, Johnny, you young idiot, come along and get this sail reefed."

Johnny, observing with his shrewd, small eyes that the

Captain appeared to be in a very good humour, grew less apprehensive about his shoulders, and set to work with a quite unusual alacrity, in hopes of procuring a remission of his self-imposed sentence. Instead of looking about for a stick or a rope's-end, Captain Macdonell was laughing and joking with the young lady while he was getting the boat into proper trim; and at last, when everything was right, he insisted on her resuming possession of the tiller and the main-sheet.

"That's the thing!" he said to her, as the boat shot forward through these rushing seas. "Don't be afraid—keep her full—let her have it—never mind the gusts—that's the way now!"

This was all very well; but the small craft, reefed and all as she was, was now tearing along at a spanking pace; and Alison could not help regarding with apprehension the surging and hissing water that came so close up to the rail.

"Please, I wish you would take these things!" she said.

"Certainly, if you prefer it," he answered at once; and she made room for him, so that he could sit with his left arm on the tiller and his right hand holding the sheet.

"Ah, that is so much more pleasant!" said she, with a smile. "I feel safe now; and—and I can thank you for having come out to our rescue; for we were in danger, were we not?"

He hesitated; then he laughed.

"I should like to think I had saved you from a watery grave. And I should like you to think it too. But I am afraid I must tell the truth. Of course, when you kept staggering into the wind like that, with every inch of canvas up, a particularly bad squall might have sent you over; but as soon as Johnny had lowered the sail you were safe enough; you would merely have drifted away up north

again—with the chance of being run down by a steamer if you didn't get in before nightfall. But the two men who drew my attention to you fancied you were in a parlous case; and I can tell you John Gilpin didn't whisk through Edmonton half as fast as I got down through Fort William to the quay. But if you want to be very much indebted to me," he continued, in his usual frank and good-humoured way, "you may take into consideration that I had no time to reef the sail of the *Blue-Bell* when I set out; I had the sheet once round my wrist, and took my chance of the puffs."

"I am sure I would much rather believe that you rescued us from very serious danger," said Alison, with a pleasant smile.

"This I am going to do for you at any rate," said he—"I am going to show you something of the management of a boat, so that you yourself may know what to do if you should get into a difficulty again. And I don't think there is any use in our trying to get down to Corran—beating against a wind like this—before the steamer comes up from Ballachulish. We should not be in time. What do you say—shall we run away up to the head of the loch and get into more sheltered water, and I will give you your first lessons in sailing?"

"Very well," said she. "You have saved our lives; you can do what you like with us."

Accordingly Johnny was ordered to haul up the main-tack; the steersman rounded the boat away from the wind, and slacked out the main-sheet; and presently they were spinning along before the brisk breeze, with the water apparently grown quite smooth around them. John, foreseeing a long spell of idleness, proceeded to make himself comfortable. He stretched himself flat on the deck, face downward, put his elbows out at right angles, and rested his chin on his clasped hands. But he

did not try to sleep; on the contrary, his small, twinkling eyes were shrewdly observant; and as all fear of a thrashing was now gone from his mind, he was in a humorous, cheerful, and communicative mood. He did not exactly join in the conversation between Captain Macdonell and Miss Blair; but from time to time he made remarks—which might be listened to or not listened to. After all, he was in a position of some importance. He was the custodian of the boat. He was giving them this sail. Besides, his observations were addressed to the sea, and the sky, and the air; no one was obliged to listen; but the shrewd, twinkling eyes knew pretty well when he had been overheard.

A large steam-yacht passed them, making for the north.

"Cosh, I would like fine to see her run into a steamer!" said this merry lad (*talking* to his two hands). "She would chump and chump in the watter before she went down head-first!"

A black-backed gull flew past overhead.

"If I had a herring now," Johnny was heard to mutter, "I would put a hook in it, and float it out with a piece of string; and ferry soon you'd see him come back and dive for the herring. Ay, and when he found the hook in his throat, wouldn't he think he had catched hold of the Duffle!"

There was a small cottage perched up on the wooded heights they were passing—on a plateau, with a bit of clearance around it: a solitary croft, perhaps, removed far above the world, or perhaps a shelter for some keeper or watcher belonging to Conaglen Forest.

"What a lonely place that must be to live in!" Alison said to her companion.

And Johnny must needs raise his eyes too. He regarded that isolated cottage for some time.

"I'm thinking that wass the last place that God made,"

he observed to himself, laying his chin once more on the cushion of his two hands—"ay, the last place that God made, when He wass going awch hom tired on the Saturday night."

"Johnny," Macdonell said sharply, "get up and put those oars and boat-hooks properly together. And slack out the lee jib-sheet a bit more. What's the use o' your lying sprawling on the deck there, like a dead porpoise?"

Thus admonished, Johnny got up and began, in a lazy and leisurely fashion, to put things ship-shape; but he was grinning a little; perhaps the dark cogitations of his own brain were affording him amusement.

They ran away up to the entrance of Loch Eil, where they got into more sheltered water; and here, the reefs being shaken out, Alison received her first lessons in the art of sailing a small cutter. It was an interesting, even an absorbing, task; and the first intimation they got that Flora and Hugh must have returned to Fort William was the passing by of the great scarlet-funnelled steamer on her way to Corpach. But still they continued at their manœuvres and evolutions; for Alison was eager to learn; and Captain Macdonell was grown rather proud of his pupil; while to the boy John was administered as sound and wholesome a dose of work as he had encountered for many a long day. They hardly noticed how the time passed. As the mellow afternoon went by the wind moderated considerably; so that they could run out into the open loch when they chose, with no thought of reefing. Alison admitted that she was rather hungry; but she was not going to give up for that reason. Moreover, when he at length overcame her persistency, and got her consent to make for home, it was found that far more time than they had expected was consumed in getting back, in securing the boat at her moorings, and so forth; and when at last they reached the house, Alison

discovered that there was not much more than half-an-hour left for her in which to write a letter to her sister Agnes before the general assembling for supper. So she went to her room with all speed, for she had promised to write.

She had been there hardly over ten minutes when the door was brusquely thrown open, and her cousin Flora appeared—indignant in mien, and yet amused in a kind of way.

"Alison Blair," said this ferocious termagant, who looked as if she wanted to fling something, and was inclined to laugh all the same, "I'm going to have a word with you. Oh yes, it's all very well for you to look prim and innocent, Miss Dimity Puritan—open your big gray eyes, do!—but this is what I've got to say to you: you may run away with Aunt Gilchrist's money, if you like, but you shan't carry off my sweetheart as well—there! Is that plain talking? You can't expect to have everything, surely! Do you hear?"

"Flora!" Alison said in blank amazement.

"Oh, I know! I've heard of your goings-on. I've heard of your adventures. Oh yes, and your tremendous courage and endurance and coolness—lightning-storms seem to come quite natural to you, for all as prim and mim as you are! But what business have you with my sweetheart?—that's what I want to know!"

Alison had risen; she was very pale.

"Flora, I thought you and Captain Macdonell were engaged—I made sure of it—and that is why I wished to be friends with him."

"Look how frightened she is!" said this strapping young damsel. "That's what happens when the guilty are found out. Oh, I know the ways of you quiet ones. Well, I'm not going to quarrel," she continued, with a sudden change of manner. "Take him. Take him, and

welcome. A sweetheart more or less is nothing to me; I've got plenty of them, poor things; wait till you come to the Volunteer Ball, and you'll see for yourself. But all the same it *was* shabby, Alison, the moment my back was turned!"

"Flora, will you speak reasonably for a moment?" Alison pleaded. "Will you listen? I made sure you were going to be married to Captain Macdonell. Isn't it so?"

"Isn't it so?" repeated the other. "Well, he hasn't asked me, that's to begin with; and, secondly, he isn't likely to; and a-hundred-and-twenty-fifthly and lastly, dear Miss Dimity, I wouldn't have him. But none the less I consider it remarkably cool of you to step in in this way——"

"Flora!" called out Hugh from below. "Flora!—Alison!—Aunt Gilchrist wants you both. Look alive! Supper's just coming in."

So Alison had to leave her letter unfinished; and as she went downstairs to the dining-room—a little bewildered, perhaps—she was hurriedly trying to recall all that had passed between herself and this young Captain Ludovick, who was not, as it appeared, her cousin's *fiancé* at all, but, as one might say, a stranger.

CHAPTER V.

A BOAT LAUNCH.

But to Alison the astonishing thing about these good people, now that she saw them in the familiar intimacy of their own home and social circle, was the easy and contented way in which they took their life. Here was no studied mortification of all natural enjoyment; no constant and anxious introspection; no dwelling upon Death and Judgment as the only subjects worthy of human concern. The ordinary incidents of the day seemed to be for them sufficient; a prevailing cheerfulness and good-humour attended both their occupations and their amusements; and if there were sharp words at times—especially when Aunt Gilchrist's peripheral neuralgia was wandering around—these sharp words left no morbid sting. Alison felt all this; but she did not write to her sister about it, for it was difficult of explanation. But she was well aware (and perhaps with a little twinge of conscience at times) that she herself was being affected by this freer, this happier atmosphere. Gladness came with the first moment of her waking; whether there was rain or sunlight outside, there would be beautiful, clear things to look at; and gladness went with her down to the breakfast-table, where, whatever mischief and sarcasm might be flying about, there was always a covert intention of kindness. Alison, it is to be feared, was becoming a most worldly and careless and thoughtless person. She had forgotten all about Paley's "Evidences." She was as

ger as any of the yo- ger folk in their various diversions and busy idleness he walked down every morning to the building-shed to ee how the new boat was getting on, and Hugh quite tolerated her society now ; she made Master Johnny regret the day that ever he offered to be her servant, for she kept him rowing and rowing, while she practised until she got her hands hopelessly blistered; she was ready at a moment's notice to run along and order the waggonette, when Aunt Gilchrist, out of the plenitude of her wealth, would go for a drive ; and she showed not the slightest hesitation when, as they pulled up at a certain hotel, she was bidden to go in and ask for Captain Macdonell, and invite him to join the small excursion. Aunt Gilchrist had come forth from her chamber in royal spirits; somehow or other she had procured for herself a temporary mitigation of her neuralgic pains, while refusing to have anything to do with the drugs prescribed by the doctors ; and now she was waving a flag of triumph over her enemies, and singing a song of victory. But why, at such a juncture, she should have thought fit to include the Fort William ministers in the hosts she was supposed to have routed; it would be difficult to determine.

"What ails ye at the ministers, Jane?" said her sister-in-law, with a quiet smile. "If they trouble you as little as ye trouble them, I'm thinking you have little to complain of."

"The bodies! The poor bits o' bodies!" said Aunt Gilchrist, in the magnificence of her scorn. "They're just alike with the doctors; they're a' tarred with the same stick; if you do not go to them there will be no mercy for you, in this world, or the next. Oh yes, the ministers have got their bits o' bottles too, stoppered and labelled; 'saving grace' written on the outside; and they're the only lawful and licensed dispensers. They've got their iodides, I warrant ye, and their salicines, and

their spirits of ammonia; and a fine stramash and roar they set up if ye go by and pay no heed to them. I'm told, Alison, ye heard a fine whig-gig o' denouncing last Sunday; and all about what?—about that harmless bit of a temperance shanty they have put on the top of Ben Nevis; and of course it's to be torn down and scattered to the winds because it's a temptation to the young lads that leads them past the church door—the temptation to climb four thousand four hundred feet of a mountain, and at the top of it not a single glass of ale to slake their thirst! Poor fellows, it's no often they get a glimpse of the outside world, what with their work all the week, and then the chances of a wet day; and what harm can there be in going up that hill, when there's not even a dram to be got? But no, no; it's my consulting-room ye've got to come to; if ye do not use my bottles and phials and patent mixtures, then you're doomed. You'd think that no human creature could get to heaven without applying to them for a ticket——"

"Aunt Gilchrist," said Alison, with a smile, "it wasn't so much the climbing of Ben Nevis that the minister was angry about, it was about Sabbath-breaking generally; and he said that the college-boys at Fort Augustus played cricket on the Sabbath afternoons: now will you defend that?"

But Aunt Gilchrist was not to be driven into a corner.

"They're Roman Catholics," she answered, "and I will leave the Roman Catholics to defend themselves. But what I say is this: that the Lord made us all, and you may trust Him to look after us all—better than these dour-faced pulpit-thumpers imagine. Set them up with their bells and their bells! I will say this for the doctors, poor bodies: they may haver as much as ye like, and try to get ye to live on poisons, but they dinna claim the right to summon the whole population to their shops wi' a

swinging and jangling of iron hammers. Mercy o' me! the confusion of noise there is on a Sabbath morning, in this wee town of Fort William, passes everything."

"I thought I was back in Kirk o' Shields, aunt e, when I first heard it," Alison said. "But the rest of the Sabbath day is very, very different from Kirk o' Shields."

"How, then?" said Flora, who had just come in.

"Oh, well," the young lady continued, "here it is so brisk and cheerful to see the people come driving in to church in their dog-carts and waggonettes, and putting up at the inns; and in the afternoon there is a good deal of strolling along the sea-shore, or up the hills there; and then, in the evening, it is so pretty to see the boats taking the people home across the quiet loch——"

"Alison Blair, I am just ashamed to hear you!" Flora exclaimed. "Driving, walking, rowing on the Sabbath day—and you sit in that chair and describe such wickedness without wringing your hands! And do you know this, Aunt Gilchrist?—next Sunday she is coming to the Established Church with us—yes, indeed; she has promised. Just think of that! Poor thing—lost—lost!—gone over to Erastianism—a pervert from the faith of her forefathers!"

Indeed, sectarian differences appeared to bother these good folk very little, if at all; while as for the deeper mysteries of human life, and the possibilities surrounding it, these were never so much as mentioned among them. Aunt Gilchrist's easy-going formula, "The Lord made us, and He'll look after us," seemed to be tacitly adopted by all of them; and it was hardly incumbent upon Alison, although she had been brought up among serious-minded people, to begin and rebuke them for their contented optimism. Aunt Gilchrist, having for the time being cast forth the neuralgic demons that had been tormenting her, was determined upon enjoying her new-found liberty to

the rull; and although the excuse was that Alison ought to be shown all the neighbourhood around, the fact was that the old lady herself was passionately fond of a jaunt and its excitement. She herself was the gayest of the gay as the comfortable waggonette drove them away along the lonely glens, the sweet air blowing by them, the sun warm on the heather and the birches and the purple-gray rocks, the hills rising far above them into the cloudless blue. She had got a large luncheon-basket, most cunningly contrived, that could carry an abundance of provisions and render them independent of inns; and they would halt at midday and have luncheon on some roadside knoll, where there were a few overhanging trees to shelter them from the sun. And supposing, in these still solitudes, that the day should turn to rain: what did Aunt Gilchrist care? With rugs and water-proofs skilfully disposed, the little party seemed more snug and merry than ever; and the old lady would sing away at her Scotch songs, which she declared were infinitely more inspiriting and sensible than their Highland wails and lamentations. Nay, in defiance of the Doctor, she usually carried in the luncheon-basket a bottle of most excellent sherry; and a glass of sherry and a biscuit (especially in these troublous times of wet) she maintained never harmed human creature.

"Aunt Gilchrist," Alison would say, laughing, "you're 'working for what you'll get.'"

"Oh yes, I know, I know," she would answer scornfully; "ye've heard the Doctor say that, poor body! Duncan must aye be grumbling about something; the last was the expense of hiring this waggonette, instead of taking the coach or the mail-gig. Well, and if it is an expense, we're rid o' they English tourists; and we can stop where we like; and we've better fun altogether. Then just consider, Alison: when this bit of a pleasure-

making's over, I'll be going away for the whole winter into a Hydropathic, and living in penury and sackcloth and ashes—ay, and instead of a biscuit and a glass of sherry in the forenoon, and a drop o' toddy the last thing at night, it will be soda-water, and seltzer-water, and potass-water, and maybe some o' their bromides or iodides three times a day. 'Working for what I'll get?'—very well, then: *I don't care;* now is that enough for you?"

"Quite enough, Aunt Gilchrist. But if your rheumatism should come back, you will remember I warned you."

"*You*—warn me?—you impertinent minx! What do you know about it? And I tell you this, that my pains and sufferings are not to be called by any such common and ordinary name as rheumatism. Rheumatism? My word! It's a kind of rheumatism that has kept the doctors clashing their empty heads together for ever and ever so long, and they're not a bit wiser now than when they begun." And thus would Aunt Gilchrist end the deadly feud.

Hugh Munro went with them on certain of those excursions; but Ludovick Macdonell accompanied them always—he seemed to take it for granted that he was to be their escort, whether he received a formal invitation or no. Alison, remembering her cousin's revelations, had resolved to treat Captain Macdonell with a certain reserve; but in this constant association she found it difficult—nay, impossible; any stiffness of demeanour on her part seemed to be thawed away by the sunny cheerfulness, the confidence, the imperturbable good-nature of the young man himself. He would not allow her to hold him at arm's length. He looked after her, as he looked after the others, in a masterful kind of way; he made no scruple about fastening a waterproof cape round her neck, or a thick rug round her knees; it was he, not she, who was judge as to whether she required another slice of cold lamb at lunch.

And yet Alison instinctively felt that there was some little difference between his manner towards her and towards the others. He was not *quite* so masterful with her. There was a consideration, a kind of gentleness and courtesy that he particularly showed towards her; and that she atttributed to the fact of her being a stranger. He seemed to take an especial care of her, when she was alighting from the waggonette, or coming along a gang-way, or getting into the rowing-boat of an evening. Whatever babblement of talk was going on, the smallest remark that Alison made he was sure to hear, and to answer. It was "Miss Alison" now; and while Miss Alison was made to do this and that, all for her own good, no doubt, his general supervision and authority over her was always accompanied by a certain gentle consideration and respect. And who, indeed, was going to say that Miss Alison should not have the box-seat on the coach, and the thickest rug on board the steamer, and the window-view in the inn parlour, when she was at once a stranger and a guest?

Aunt Gilchrist, who was a shrewd and observant small woman, was by no means blind to all these pretty little civilities and all this meek and courteous attention; and she thought she would address a few warning words, in a skilful and roundabout way, to the young laird of Oyre. One afternoon the four of them—Aunt Gilchrist, Captain Macdonell, Flora, and Alison—were over at Corpach. They had driven down Glenfinnan the previous day; had passed the night at Kinloch Aylort; and were now on their way back, waiting for the steamer to take them across to Fort William. As it chanced, Alison and Flora were walking up and down the pier together, talking, or idly looking over to the picturesque view of Inverlochy Castle and Ben Nevis that has been so often painted; and Captain Ludovick had sat down beside the old lady to keep her company. Here was an excellent opportunity.

"And when are ye going back to Oyre, Captain Macdonell?" Aunt Gilchrist said. "I'm afraid we have led ye into a great deal of idleness."

"Oh, well," he answered lightly, "there has been some business to keep me hanging about Fort William this last week or two. We are going to have some alterations made at Oyre; and there were the plans to be overhauled; and to-morrow I am to have the estimate. Then there is the launching of Hugh's boat; that will be a great occasion; of course I must wait for that. Besides," he added, "one doesn't often get the chance of going about with so pleasant a party—and that's the truth; and I'm very much obliged to you for letting me help in arranging these little trips, for of course we all want Miss Alison to see Lochaber to the best advantage."

"Miss Alison?" the old dame repeated, with grave and inscrutable eyes. "Oh yes, indeed. Miss Alison. Maybe there is some little attraction there?"

She did not look at him.

"Don't you think there is a great deal of attraction?" said he frankly. "I think so—and I don't care who knows it; I think there ought to be a great deal of attraction for any one; and it isn't merely her good looks and her pretty figure—these are obvious enough; and it isn't merely her kindly disposition—for lots of people have this; but—but—there's something more. She has got her head screwed on straight, and that's the fact. At first she was rather shy and reserved; but ever since she came here she seems to have been growing brighter and merrier every day; and can't she hold her own, if there's any kind of joking and quarrelling going on! Why, it has been quite delightful," continued Captain Ludovick, who seemed to have found an interesting subject, "to watch her become more and more at home, and happier and brighter every day. I fancy that Kirk o' Shields

must be an awful place. She has given me some hints about the kind of life the people live there, and I think she is rather glad to be out of it for a time; though she declares she has come into a land peopled by Sadducees. But she has a wonderfully fair and even and well-balanced mind, and a clear and quick brain; and if you show her that such or such a thing is reasonable and harmless, and so forth, she accepts it, no matter what her upbringing has been. Of course you recollect, Mrs. Gilchrist, that it was you who taught her 'catch-the-ten;' and you see now who is the first to propose it, when the supper-things have been removed."

But Aunt Gilchrist was not to be put off her purpose; this rambling panegyric was all very well, but it was not business.

"I'm very pleased to hear ye say so," she observed, with much deliberation; "very pleased indeed. For I confess to a liking for the bit lady; and I'm glad to know that in the eyes of other folk she has attractions—and attractions in her own right, so that she is not dependent on what others may do for her. Now, I'm going to be frank with ye, Captain Macdonell, and I'll tell ye why. I like to hear my bit lady well spoken of, and for her own sake alone. When the doctors have done their worst wi' me, and I must go—and indeed there needna be much regret about departing for another world if it's a Hydropathic ye happen to be living in at the time—there's a little money I've to leave behind me; and both my poor husband and myself were of one mind that it should go to Alison—or the bulk of it, at least. But that's just as I choose; I may leave it to her, or not leave it to her. Now attend to this: what's the value of the solemn will and testament of a wretched creature that suffers from neureetis? Why, as long as he or she is alive, not a brass farthing! Not a single penny, I tell ye! A twinge goes

through your ankle: there's a flare-up of a quarrel: a new will made instanter, and the money goes to somebody else. That's the way of it. If King David was alive—poor man, he said some sensible things when he wasna aye groaning away at his supplications—King David would say, 'Put not your trust in princes; no, nor in anybody that has got peripheral neuralgia.' So ye understand, Captain Ludovick, why it is I'm pleased that my niece Alison is attractive on her own account, for it is entirely possible that she will never get a farthing from me."

This intimation—which in the end was plain and clear enough, notwithstanding the cunning and roundabout way it had been introduced—did not seem to disconcert the young laird. As Alison and Flora were coming up at the moment, all he could say was—

"I don't think your niece will ever have to depend on *that* attraction, Mrs. Gilchrist; but neither do I think that you and she are likely to quarrel."

When at length they got over to Fort William, they found Hugh Munro waiting for them on the quay (a most unexpected honour), with the great news that his sailing-boat was quite finished, and ready to be launched on the following morning. As they walked along to the house, he somewhat shyly suggested to Alison that she might perform the christening ceremony; and Alison cheerfully assented—merely stipulating that she should be told what to do. But when they would have him finally declare what he had resolved to call the new craft, he became evasive. They would know in the morning, he said. He wanted to see how the name looked—in blue letters on the band of white under the gunwale.

"Oho!" cried Flora. "Then to-morrow we are to get at the grand secret, Alison! I believe it's that Irish girl who was at Ballachulish with the Macphersons; you'll see the boat will be called 'Norah,' or 'Rosina,' or

'Kathleen': do you know, he was quite civil to her; he actually stood by the piano, and turned over her music for her—I wonder when he would do that for any of us!"

However, Hugh would say nothing further; and during the rest of the evening, whenever the morrow's celebration was spoken of, it was chiefly to assure Alison that her duties would be extremely simple. Nor was there to be much of an assemblage: the Doctor would be away attending to his professional duties; Mrs. Munro would be looking after her household; Aunt Gilchrist did not care to walk so far (periphery forbidding); and they certainly did not mean to take the fiend Johnny with them on the inaugural trip, and have him wishing all the time for the joy of some mighty disaster. Not only that, but the designer and owner of the craft intimated to the two girls that, after the christening ceremony, they might as well return home: Ludovick and he meant to have a serious trial of the boat and her sails; and it would be a mistake (as he hinted) to have useless baggage on board.

The ceremony, as it turned out, was of the briefest. On this bright, breezy, sunny morning the four of them walked along to the building-yard, and found the trim, shining, newly varnished boat fixed in an improvised slip, with a gallant bunch of white heather at her bowsprit. Alison, with a modest little bottle in her hand, came forward blithely enough to perform her part; but when she got to the stem of the boat she suddenly paused, and a quick flush overspread her pale face; for there, before her, on the white band, in neat, small letters of blue, she beheld the name that had been chosen—THE BIT LADY. Hugh was shy, and hung back; Flora was laughing; but Ludovick Macdonell, who was by Alison's side, took the bottle from her, cut the strings, released the cork, and returned it to her; whereupon she poured a little of the wine over the bow, and managed to say, "Good luck—

and—and—I hope she will be everything that has been expected of her—and—and good weather!"—which, alas! was all unlike the neat little speech she had prepared. Then with a cheer the boat was run down the slip into the water, and held there; the builder's men had a glass of whiskey apiece, to drink her good-fortune; and forthwith, as Macdonell and Hugh got on board, and began to haul the sails about, the two young ladies took their departure.

"And what do you think of yourself now?" demanded Miss Flora of her companion (who, in truth, was extremely mortified that she had made such a muddle of her benediction). "I believe you were in the secret all the time. Oh, it's you quiet ones who know how to come out with a dramatic effect! The pretty confusion—the pretty embarrassment—the pretty, stammering little speech! Very well done—very well done indeed—you hypocrite and actress! But there's one thing perhaps you're not aware of; it wasn't Hugh who ever thought of calling the boat after you; no, it wasn't. Don't you go and pride yourself, Miss Dimity, with the notion that you have found favour in the eyes of my lord the Sultan. What can you do better than any of us? Can you drive a nail in straight? Are you ever correct about the direction of the wind? Can you mark a tennis-court, or fold a newspaper, or, indeed, do anything right? Can you strap up a portmanteau without making a fool of yourself? Well, now that is too bad!" continued Miss Flora, suddenly shifting her ground. "You don't know what trouble I take in packing his portmanteau for him—remembering twenty things he would be sure to have forgotten, and putting them all in their places, and folded and arranged, instead of shovelling them together, as he would do. Then, when everything is ready to be sent downstairs, my lord comes in; he looks at the portman-

teau; catches hold of a strap—and of course it's sure to yield a little if you pull at it with the strength of a rhinoceros; he nods his head, as much as to say, 'I thought so; this is the way a girl buckles a strap;' then he hauls each strap until he has got each buckle three holes tighter, and away he goes with a contemptuous look. And do you think he considers you anything more accurate, or handy, or fit to live than the rest of us? I bet you now, if he asked you to guess the distance over to the other side of the loch there, you would be at least half a mile out; and he wouldn't remonstrate with you; he'd only look at you as if to say, 'I wonder what tempted Providence to create such a set of helpless idiots as girls are!' So don't you flatter yourself, Miss Dimity Puritan, that you have won any favour. You're only a girl—your pronunciation of Latin is always wrong—you're frightened of cows—you can't do anything right. But if you would like to know who put that idea into his head of calling the boat after you——"

"Who, then, Flora?" her companion asked; but the big gray eyes were downcast, and there was a slight flush on the pale face that seemed to say that Miss Alison had guessed the answer to her own question.

"Why, Ludovick Macdonell, of course!" the other said. "Isn't it as clear as day?"

CHAPTER VI.

UEBER ALLEN GIPFELN.

WELL, *The Bit Lady* was duly launched, and her sailing powers tested again and again; but nevertheless Ludovick Macdonell seemed to be in no hurry to return to Oyre. Perhaps the plans and specifications wanted further amending; perhaps the contractor's estimate was excessive; at all events, Captain Macdonell remained in Fort William, and very much at the service of the Munroes, and of Miss Alison their guest. It was not "Alison" as yet, but matters were tending in that direction; for the young man carried his good-humoured straightforwardness to the verge of audacity; and these four companions had been much together. They left Johnny ashore now when they went away lythe-fishing as the evening fell. Alison had got on capitally with her rowing, and she was fond of it; and she preferred to ply a lazy oar in concert with Captain Ludovick, while Flora and Hugh, in the stern of the boat, looked after the rods, and the lines, and the large white flies. Sometimes the fishing was not heeded much. Sometimes they merely rowed, and quietly talked and listened —the hills around them growing darker and more dark, but the loch reflecting a wan and steely gray from the pale splendour still hanging in the north-western heavens. The charm of the twilight was enough for them: the birds all gone to rest; an odour of sea-weed in the slumbering air; an orange ray, trembling down on the mystic expanse of the water, telling of some cottage-window under the

black woods opposite; a point of red and a point of green far in the south—the sailing-lights of a yacht lying there becalmed. Then the long and idle pull home; the first white stars becoming visible in the transparent heavens; a string of golden beads along the distant shore showing them the little town for which they were making. Hugh would now take Alison's place, sending her to sit side by side, and arm in arm, with Flora. And when either brother or sister began to sing one of those old Gaelic airs, instantly there was the other voice joining in, softly and with exquisite harmony, in this silence broken only by the measured plash of the oars. These were magical, lambent nights. When Alison, long afterwards, in Kirk o' Shields, tried to recall them, it seemed to her as if they were far too wonderful and beautiful—as if they never could have been.

But meanwhile there came along the long-talked-of night pilgrimage to the summit of Ben Nevis, with the hope of witnessing the sun rise over the German Ocean; and when the appointed evening arrived, everything seemed to be propitious. The weather had been fine for some days before; the glass was high and steady; the few light airs wandering about hardly stirred the glassy surface of the loch. Accordingly, all preparations were made; and when they were ready to start, Johnny was sent on in advance with the two ponies, and directed as to where he should wait for the little party outside the town.

Johnny was a very proud lad as he set forth; for although his savage manners had not been softened by any acquaintance with the graceful palæstra, he bestrode his meek-eyed animal with much dignity, leading the other pony—the sumpter-pony, which carried the slung water-proofs and what not—by the bridle-rein, while in his right hand he bore sceptre-wise a stout oaken cudgel.

Nor was his dignity of demeanour, as he passed in stately fashion along the main street of Fort William, sacrificed to that love of adventure which was dear to his heart. It is true that once or twice he tried hard to ride over and scatter a group of sprawling urchins; but this was of no avail, for the small boys of Fort William knew John, and fled at his approach as minnows flee from a marauding pike. Again, when he was nearly out of the town, he aimed a playful blow at a mongrel cur that happened to be wandering there; but he missed—his stick being too short; whereupon the mongrel replied with a sudden and vicious snarl, which caused Johnny's pony to swerve so violently that its rider was very nearly thrown into the middle of the highway. John turned in his saddle and regarded the now departing cur, so as to fix its appearance firmly in his memory.

"You duffle!" he said. "I will not forget you. No, my young boy, I will not forget you! I will gif you something before many days are over—something that will be ferry good for you."

And then he went on again, grinning to himself; for he knew of many and divers schemes of vengeance which he could leisurely pick and choose from before returning from the top of Ben Nevis to his own familiar haunts and occupations.

Flora, Alison, Hugh, and Ludovick Macdonell had by this time started; and a very gay and merry little group they were as they left the town. For one thing, there was a spice of adventure in this expedition: even Alison had got to understand that it was the unexpected that usually happened in the mysterious solitudes of Ben Nevis. But at present everything seemed most promising; the evening was clear and golden as they passed along the highway, crossed the bridge, and followed the path by the river-bank; the mellow light was still warm on the foliage

overhanging the stream; and a scent of new-mown hay hung in the air, for there was not a breath of wind. With reasonable luck they could almost count on a beautiful morning; and, what was also of some small importance, they could make fairly sure of a clear starlit night to enable Johnny to get the ponies down in safety, there being no shelter for these animals at the top.

By the time they had got to the point at which the rude pathway leaves the wide valley of Glen Nevis and begins the ascent of the lower slopes of the mountain, the golden evening had given place to a silver-clear twilight, and the slender sickle of the new moon was visible over the sombre masses of hills in the south. Here Johnny was waiting; and when Flora and Alison had been properly and carefully mounted on the ponies the procession set forth. First went Flora, with Hugh as her attendant; then came Alison, with Captain Ludovick walking by her pony's head, his fingers just touching the bridle-rein; Johnny was left to lag behind as he chose, but with the knowledge that present laziness and comfort would only make his midnight descent so much the later. At first the way was not very steep; the ponies got along easily enough; and Alison was delighted to find, in contradiction of her fears, that she had no difficulty at all in holding on. Then if the night seemed closing down on the world, there was still a clear twilight around them, in which all the neighbouring objects—the rocks and knolls and chasms and trickling streams—were strangely distinct. Indeed, it was altogether a joyous setting-out. The two young ladies were calling to each other; Alison in especial was in the highest spirits, and was so fearless and careless that her companion had to warn her to take heed a little when her pony was making its way across the rough stones in the bed of some shallow rivulet. She wanted to know when they were to be allowed to get down and walk.

Would they go near the tarn where he and she had been caught in a thunder-storm? When should they be able to see the lights in Fort William?—or was that not possible at all?

But as they got farther and farther up into the awful solitude of the hills, and as they seemed to be leaving the world they had known farther and farther below them, there was less talking; and when they came to a rude little wooden bridge spanning a burn—and here on the bit of level they rested the ponies for a breathing-space—it was in silence they contemplated their vast and lonely surroundings. There was still a lambent glow in the north-western heavens; but the world beneath them seemed to have grown dark; a gray mist filled the silent valleys. Alison saw the crescent moon reflected on some distant sheet of smooth water, but she did not know whether that was a solitary little lake among the hills, or an in-winding arm of the sea; and as no one was speaking at the time she did not ask. Then they resumed their upward toil, following the rough path that zigzagged up the mighty shoulders and slopes; while the night came on apace, and the first of the small, twinkling diamond-points began to show in the wan sky overhead.

By-and-by Ludovick Macdonell touched her on the arm to draw her attention. Then she could hear that Flora and Hugh were singing some song or ballad together. She could hardly make out the words, though Macdonell knew them well enough—

"The stars are all burning cheerily, cheerily,
Ho ro, Mairi dhu, turn to me!
The sea-mew is mourning drearily, drearily,
Ho ro, Mairi dhu, turn to me!"

—but the air was plaintive and tender, and their intermingling voices, even amid the clatter of the ponies' hoofs, made a strangely effective harmony in the silence

and the dark. For dark it had now become, although the stars overhead were shining more and more clearly. She could hardly make out the path before her, or above her, rather, but she knew that it had become exceedingly steep and exceedingly rough, from the straining and stumbling of the patient animal that carried her. And as far as the starlight could show her anything of her immediate surroundings, she saw that here no longer were steep grassy slopes scarred with water-channels, but blocks of sterile rock heaped upon one another, and apparently rising perpendicularly into the sky. There were no more soft, retreating outlines in the dusk; these black masses were sharp and angular; and sharp, too, were the turns of the now invisible path. This upward struggle seemed interminable. The labouring animals fought gallantly; but now there was no little bit of a level bridge to give them a rest; there was nothing but this continuous, indomitable strain; the foot-falls on the splintered stones; the black rocks all around; the white stars overhead.

And then—as it appeared to her—and still far beyond them and above them—her startled eyes beheld three squares of crimson light. She was astonished beyond measure. She had grown accustomed to the black solitudes and the silence; she had come to think there was nothing above her but that great vault of stars: what were these strange illuminations? Had they toiled upward from the valleys of the world, to find before them the mystic gates of heaven? And now she found that the pony was going with less of an upward strain; and Macdonell (who had not spoken to her for some time back, having to save his breath for the climbing) was leading the animal carefully forward over the loose stones; and at length her bewildered eyes made out that they were nearing some dark object, of unknown dimensions, and that these three squares of crimson were windows

with red blinds. The next minute a blaze of yellow light came forth into the dark; Flora, she saw, was getting down from her pony; presently they were all standing at the open door, giving one look backward to the clear-throbbing skies (there Capella was burning; and the misty Pleiades; the pale mother of Andromeda displayed her trembling jewels; and Arcturus shone from afar) before they passed into the common room of this remote little caravanserai, where a pleasant welcome and a blazing fire awaited them.

And now the long-pent-up flood of talk broke loose; for these were new experiences, and so far the expedition had been wholly successful; besides, they were glad to get into this warm and friendly shelter after passing through the bleak and dark solitudes. Very soon there was a sumptuous banquet of ham and eggs smoking on the table before them; and as this light-hearted little group of friends sat round the hospitable board, they fell to talking about the great masses of population far away beneath them—the population of Great Britain, in fact—in dining-rooms and drawing-rooms, in lecture-rooms and concert-rooms, sitting in theatres, dressing for balls, busy with the endless amusements and occupations of modern life. And Captain Ludovick not only claimed for his companions that they constituted the uppermost circle of all the social circles in Great Britain, but maintained that, viewed from their sublime elevation, all other gradations of rank and position and dignity were as nothing at all—were as half-invisible lines. They were not quite sure but that the scientific gentleman in the observatory might be their superior by a few feet; at all events, he was their only rival as to pride of place in the three kingdoms. And presently there came another to share their glory—Johnny, to wit—who put his head in at the door to announce his arrival.

Johnny was exceedingly sulky when he came in, for the last part of the ascent had been more than he had bargained for, and he was breathless and tired and beaten; but when he was directed to sit down at a small table, and presented with a lavish supper—moreover, Captain Ludovick was so kind as to order for him a bottle of that delectable beverage, ginger ale, which Johnny had never before tasted—he got into a much better humour; and an occasional twinkle in his eye showed that he heard plainly enough what was going on at the other table.

"Well, Johnny," said Flora, turning to him, "and what do you think of Ben Nevis now?"

"Well," said he, with his mouth half full, but with his small eyes alert enough, "I wass thinking ahl the way up that it wass a ferry stupid thing to make a hull as big as thus. A ferry foolish thing. It is no use to any one, except to break your legs. What is the use of a hull so big as thus? But mebbe," he added, as an afterthought —and a pleasing grin suffused his face—"mebbe some day it will fall down on the top of Fort William. Cosh, there would be many a one get a sore head that day!"

"How are you going down again, Johnny?" she continued. "Are you going to ride the one pony and let the other follow?"

"Not me," said he instantly. "I do not wish to go over and break my neck."

"How will you get them down, then?" she asked.

"I will put them on the track and drive them both before me," said he. "They can see in the dark well enough, them beasts—better than me, anyway." And then he glanced at Captain Macdonell, of whom he was always somewhat afraid. "And a good thing is thus," he continued, with a furtive snigger about his mouth, "that if the Duffle is wandering about they will knock

against him first. Cosh, that would be a fine sight, to see him go head over heels down a gully!"

"As if you could see him in the dark!" said she.

"Bit why not?" he remonstrated; and there was a sort of vindictive joy in his face. "Wouldn't there be sparks of fire flying from him, he would be in such a rage?"

"I'd advise you to hurry up, my young friend," Captain Ludovick interposed, "and get those animals started off while the night is still clear. And you'd better play no pranks, mind, Master Johnny; if you lame one of those ponies you'll get something that'll make you wish you never had come within twenty miles of Lochaber."

Johnny took the hint in quite good part, for the bountiful supper and the ginger ale had comforted him exceedingly; and it was with a merry allusion to the probability of his encountering the Duffle on his way down that he untethered the ponies, took the leading one by the bridle, and disappeared into the silence of the night.

"But if he were really to be frightened on the way down?" said Alison, when they had returned to the comfortable little table near the fire. "If he were to imagine he saw something?"

"Oh no; trust the thickness of Johnny's skull for that," Hugh Munro said, with a smile. "He'll go whistling and singing all the way down to Fort William. That dark and demoniacal imagination of his doesn't reach as high as that; it deals with little things, and mostly with the birds and beasts he finds around him in actual life. When he talks about the big Duffle it's only to alarm the small boys, or to make jokes for you—if he thinks Ludovick won't fling something at him; what Johnny is really superstitious about, what he fears, is the mischief that may be done himself by dangerous creatures—toads,

adders, stinging jelly-fish, congers, and things of that kind; yes, and cats. He has an abject fear of cats—they're witches, he says—and if he can shy a stone at one when it doesn't see him, that is delight; but if it happens to turn its head, then Johnny drops the stone and looks at the sky, as innocent as you could think. But the rascal is not easily frightened, as a rule; no, the mischief with him, if he is in a boat, is that he will risk any danger for the sake of an adventure. You'll have a steamer blowing and blowing her whistle, and that fellow will keep on, trying to clear her, unless you knock him aside and jam down the helm."

"That's all very well," said Captain Ludovick, who, indeed, was not so lenient towards Johnny's impish freaks and fantasies as the others. "I don't mind his risking his own carcase for the enjoyment of a collision, but I object to his putting anybody else into danger. And you know he lost his head entirely that day he took Alison out in the boat." (It was "Alison" now, but perhaps this was a mere inadvertence.) "Why did he never get a good sound drubbing for playing that prank?"

"Because I was responsible for the whole affair," the young lady said promptly; "and if anybody is to be beaten, you must beat me."

"No, I won't beat you," said Captain Ludovick graciously; "but I'm going to send you all to bed, for you'll be called early in the morning, and you must try to get what sleep you can."

As it turned out, there was to be no sleep for Alison, or next to none, when she retired to the small chamber that had been allotted her. Towards midnight a wind arose, and gradually it increased, until it could be heard sweeping across the mountain-top in long, plaintive sighs and wails. The firmly fixed little wooden shanty did not shake, did not even tremble, but the force of the wind could be

gathered from the shriller and shriller note that seemed to be the precursor of a storm. Alison lay and listened to the bodeful sound; sometimes she slumbered off a little; then this ominous cry would wake her again, and she would wonder when the window would begin to show in the dark. And at last the welcome light appeared; there was a small square of faint bluish-gray in her apartment now; and she thought she would not wait to be called. What was the use of lying here, listening to the moaning of the wind? She got up and dressed very quietly; then she made her way into the common room, where the supper-things of the previous night were still on the table; she went to the door, lifted the latch, and passed outside.

At first she could see nothing at all. A cold gray mist was driving by, enveloping everything, so that she could only make out a few wet stones at her feet; and she dared not move a yard away from the door. But presently this small horizon began to widen; she saw more and more of the stones; then a sudden cessation of them, as if that were the edge of the little plateau; and she thought she might venture along to look into the chasm beyond. She went cautiously, for these stones were large and angular; besides, she was trying to fix in her brain the whereabouts of the wooden shanty, so that she might be able to make her way back in the event of the fog closing in upon her again. But when she got along to the edge of the chasm all was blank. There was nothing before her but a waste of gray. So she thought the others were just as well advised to remain within-doors; clearly there was to be no sunrise.

But nevertheless this mysterious, formless vacancy kept moving in a singular manner; vague phantoms seemed to pass through it; a kind of fascination kept her there, as if she knew that something must happen. And what

happened first of all was that the heavens seemed to open over her head; she quickly looked up, and behold! the zenith was of a pale, clear purple, perfectly cloudless and serene. The light around her appeared to increase; out of the white gulf before her rose a sterile crag, silent and awful; and there was a bronze hue on the bare, rocky slopes, as if they faced some unknown radiance. Then all of a sudden it seemed as if the plateau on which she stood were lifted out of these interchanging vapours, and she was bidden to look abroad on a newly created universe. Far away to the east, between her and the horizon, and almost level with her feet, stretched an interminable sea of clouds — vast mountainous masses they were, solid, slowly moving, their upper ridges touched with saffron, the intervening spaces of a shadowy, impenetrable blue. Far away to the west, again, she caught a glimpse of some lower region—of darkened hills and sombre valleys, with the wan waters of Loch Eil lying still and gray in the strange twilight. But it was the wonders that were occurring around her and before her that claimed all her attention now, startling her, bewildering her, and eventually paralyzing her with a blind, dumb sense of terror. For this seemed a dreadful thing—this rising of awful shapes out of that vast witches' caldron—sterile peaks and scarred precipices that slowly revealed themselves as if called up by some mighty magician, and as slowly disappeared again into the gloom. She seemed to be looking on at the creation of a world; but a phantasmal world; a world of spectral and shadowy cliffs and crags; whereas the solid and substantial things were the mountain-masses of cloud that she could see far below her, slow-rolling one over the other, and ever advancing, silent and threatening, until they blotted out of existence those barren heights and those lurid gulfs that a moment before had themselves seemed so terrible. And sometimes, in their slow ad-

vance, those orange-crested, gigantic billows would rise and rise, as if they were about to overwhelm her also, and the bit of rock on which she stood. Her head grew faint and giddy. The earth seemed to have no foundation. She was but a phantom in this world of phantoms: when should she, too, disappear into that awful abyss? The vision of the prophet Jeremiah was before her: "I beheld the earth, and, lo, it was without form, and void; and the heavens, and they had no light. I beheld the mountains, and, lo, they trembled, and all the hills moved lightly. I beheld, and, lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the heavens were fled." She seemed to have no power to go or to stay; the fascination of this awful phantasmagoria held her there; and yet she knew that her footing was quite unstable; all things were as a dream. And then, without warning, in a moment, the fate that she had feared befell her; she was surrounded, isolated, cut off from all the rest of the world, nothing visible to her but the piece of rock on which she stood. In vain, and with quickened terror, she turned this way and that to gain some knowledge of her position: she was conscious only that close by her, on which side she knew not, was that frightful abyss, and that a single step might launch her into its unknown deeps. She shrank back from this hideous chaos, and yet dared not move; the white mists seemed to choke her; her knees would no longer bear her weight; and while some vague, wild cry of "Alison! Alison!" rang in her ears, she sank to the ground unconscious, and lay there as if life itself had fled from her.

When she came to herself, a few minutes thereafter, she was in her own small room, whither Ludovick Macdonell had carried her, and Flora was standing by her bedside. No sooner did she open her eyes than she shuddered and drew back, as if she still thought she was on the verge of that ghastly precipice; but Flora was

holding her hand, and gently chafing it. She was for getting up forthwith, but this was not to be thought of, Flora insisted; it would be some hours before they set out on the return journey; Alison must drink some hot tea, and lie still, and if possible get some sleep.

"Why, what a fright you gave us, Alison!" Flora said, when she saw that her cousin was almost recovered. "We did not know you had gone out. We thought you might just as well be left alone in your room, since there was to be no sunrise; and then it was Ludovick who noticed that your door had been left a little bit open, and he bade me go and see. I can tell you we got a horrible fright when we found you had been out all the time, and by yourself; and just as we set out to look for you, the mist came over, and we were more frightened than ever. Didn't you hear us calling? Do you know that when Ludovick found you, you were just at the edge of that terrible precipice where the snow is?"

Alison shivered slightly.

"Yes, I know. I—I tried to come away and I couldn't—I was afraid to move. But I'm all right now, Flora; and if we are to be here for some hours yet, won't you go and lie down?"

"Well, yes, I will, then," her cousin said. "And you'd better get some sleep too, Alison. Why, the idea of your going out in a place like this all by yourself, and at such an hour—no wonder you were frightened out of your senses!"

As it chanced, Alison did eventually fall into a profound, if far from dreamless, sleep, and they did not choose to disturb her; so that it was a little after ten o'clock before the little party were ready to begin the descent of the mountain. Their down-going was not nearly so merry as their up-coming; for it was evident to the others that Captain Macdonell was unusually grave

and preoccupied. He was very kind to Alison; bidding her take plenty of time and not hurry over those loose stones which offered so insecure a foothold; and carrying her water-proof for her, when the occasional heavy showers were followed by a burst of hot sunshine. But his customary light-heartedness was gone; he seemed to be thinking back over something or other; and he only brightened up a little when at length they were all down in Glen Nevis, and Alison safely seated in the waggonette that he had ordered to meet them there.

It was a day or two after these occurrences that Flora made a little confession—or revelation, rather—to her cousin.

"Do you know, Alison," said she—and she regarded her companion's face as she spoke, yet with no inimical scrutiny—"that Ludovick was terribly put about when he found you lying on the rocks and brought you in? I believe he hardly knew what he was saying; I fancy he considered himself responsible for having advised you to go up there; and the possibility of your having come to harm frightened him terribly. Do you know what he said when he carried you in? He declared that if you had fallen over the precipice, he would have gone over too—that he would never have come down to Fort William alive."

And it was remarkable, from that day henceforth, that even among Flora's wildest jests and jibes and whimsicalities, never a word more was heard of her petulant, half-laughing taunt that Alison had stolen away her sweetheart from her.

CHAPTER VII.

AT OYRE HOUSE.

ALAS! the time was now fast approaching when Alison would have to leave this enchanted land (for it was an enchanted land to her, at all events); and Captain Ludovick, who meanwhile had carried home his plans and estimates, and come back to Fort William, was quite distressed that nothing had been settled about the long-projected visit to Oyre. Eventually he went to Flora, and besought her, as a great kindness to himself, to get Aunt Gilchrist definitely to fix a day; and Flora undertook the task with a light heart.

But this was a most luckless morning; for no sooner had the young lady broached the subject than she found herself suddenly and furiously attacked, without rhyme or reason, and overwhelmed with bitter and angry reproaches. Flora, who instantly perceived that the demon Neuritis was wandering around, was for beating an immediate retreat; but she was not allowed to go before she had received some information regarding herself. She was a thoughtless, inconsiderate, ungrateful minx; she had no care or concern for any one but herself; her elders and their sufferings and afflictions were of no account with her; only her own idle amusements and follies were uppermost in her empty head. Nay, more—she was accused of being involved in a base and vile conspiracy.

"Oh, ay," said the fierce little dame, "ye may think, because I'm old, I'm blind. I'm not blind, I tell ye; I

can see as well as any of ye. And I know these Highland lairds; they've not a penny to bless themselves with; but of course if ye get that lad Macdonell to marry Alison, then it's me that will have to pay the piper. That's your pretty scheme, is it?—and everybody's comfort to be sacrificed to it, ay, even if your very life should be put in danger by the shaking and travelling! I know fine what he's after; and I'll be bound she's willing enough too: havena I seen the blood jump to her face when she heard his foot outside on the gravel? A pretty pact it is amongst ye all!—and ye think I'm blind——"

"You may say what you like about me, Aunt Gilchrist," Flora remarked, with perfect good-nature, "but you need not say such things about Alison, for you don't believe them, to begin with. I am pretty certain that no such idea has ever entered into her head. No, nor into Ludovick's head either; but, if it had, what could be more natural? He has birth, and she will have money——"

"She will have money?" Aunt Gilchrist repeated, with a fresh explosion of wrath. "Who said she will have money?"

"Why, you yourself, Aunt Gilchrist!" said Flora.

"How dare you stand there, Flora Munro, and tell such stories!" the old lady exclaimed. "How dare you! Haven't I told every one of ye, over and over again, that she may never have a farthing? Haven't I told Macdonell too? Haven't I warned him, as plain as any woman could speak?"

"Well, if he understands that, where is the harm of his wanting to marry Alison?—that is, if he does, for I'm sure I don't know anything about it."

But this cool indifference only seemed to anger the old lady the more.

"I know what your fine arguments are worth!" she cried. "I know your hypocritical ways. Brazenness

isn't always in the face, my young madam; it may be in the conscience, let me tell you that, miss. Go away and send Alison to me!"

Flora was well content to go; and very soon she found Alison.

"Aunt Gilchrist wants you," she said cheerfully. "And you're going to catch it."

"What for?" said Alison, wondering.

"Oh, I don't know. Periphery is meandering about, I suppose; and it's too early to get her to take some port-wine negus. So off you go, Alison, my loving dear, and get your whipping."

But it was not at all as a repentant and frightened child that Miss Dimity Puritan now entered her aunt's room. For a young woman she had acquired a quite sufficient sense of her own dignity. In her earlier days she had always been "the bit lady;" and, now she was grown up, she was perhaps a little more serious-minded than many of her years. When she opened the door and went in, and closed it behind her, she was perfectly calm and self-possessed. This was not at all the kind of person to fear or to brook a whipping.

"What did you send that girl Flora to me for?" was the abrupt demand. "You hadn't the courage to come yourself, I suppose? But ye're all in the same pact—all in the same pact—and not one o' ye caring for anything but your own selfish ends and enjoyments. Enjoyments? A pretty enjoyment for me to go away harling here and harling there out o'er the country when I can scarcely put my foot to the ground to cross the room. But what do you care about that, you or any one o' them?"

"Indeed, Aunt Gilchrist, I do not want you to go to Oyre if you would rather not," Alison said quite simply. "And I'm sure I didn't send Flora to you—I believe it was Captain Macdonell who asked her. But I'm certain

of this, that not one of us would wish you to go if it would cost you any trouble—— "

"'One of us?'" the old dame repeated bitterly. "Ay, there ye are! There's the cat out o' the bag. A pact among ye to deceive a poor old woman who'll soon enough be away from amongst ye. And then perhaps ye'll be sorry. Selfishness is a fine thing for the young; but it's no so fine to look back on when they that should have been treated different have been taken away."

"Aunt Gilchrist, I don't know what you mean by talking like that!" Alison said somewhat proudly. "We thought you would be as pleased to go as any one; and no one wished you to go against your will. I don't see where there was any selfishness or deceit; and—and it isn't fair to talk like that, and about so small a thing."

"Oh yes, I'm always in the wrong!" Aunt Gilchrist exclaimed, with a toss of her head. "I'm the tyrant. You are all poor, suffering victims, and I'm a selfish monster. Say it!—oh yes, say it! I know ye say it amongst yourselves: I'm just a monster of selfishness. But what brought ye here, to Fort William, I want to know? Was it to go galivanting about the country when other folk can scarcely stir from their chair? What did ye come here for? To go prancing down to the shore and back from the shore—and stravayging about the place?"

Alison had turned a little pale.

"I came here, Aunt Gilchrist," she said, "because you were my mother's sister, and because you asked me to come; and—and because you had been kind to me many a time before." For a brief second her voice was not so firm, but only for a second; and she held her head erect. "And I was going home in a day or two, as you know; but if you do not wish me here I would rather not stay. I am ready to go at once."

"Go if you like, then!" the other said snappishly.

Alison hesitated for a moment, but there was no recalling of the ungracious words.

"Good-bye, Aunt Gilchrist!" she said.

In spite of herself tears rose to her eyes, and she stood there irresolute, not wishing to make any advance, and yet waiting for some small sign of farewell.

"Oh, go away if you like," said the irascible small dame, without looking up. "I don't want you. Your room's better than your company." And then, suddenly, a twinge of pain shot across her contracted forehead. "Here, Alison, come and unbutton my boots, will ye? I'd just like to ding that man o' a shoemaker—sending me home a pair o' boots like this when well he knew what state my feet were in!"

Dutifully Alison went forward, and knelt down and undid the buttons; and the next moment Aunt Gilchrist had snatched the boots from her, and hurled them, one after the other, with savage vehemence to the end of the room. Then she said, in quite an altered voice—

"Now, Ailie, my dear, ye'll find my cloth slippers over there under the sofa, and ye'll bring them and tie them on soft, soft."

Alison went and fetched the slippers, and proceeded to get them on with the most careful and assiduous gentleness. As she was thus engaged, she felt a hand placed lightly on her head.

"How like your hair is to your mother's, Ailie: every day I see it more and more."

And then both hands were placed on her shoulders; and Aunt Gilchrist was stooping down as if she would speak to her niece without being seen; and the girl knew that the old woman's cheek was wet with tears.

"Ailie, my lass—Ailie, my dear," she said, with a sob, "I declare to ye I'm not fit to live. I'm not fit to live. To say such things to you—that are just as gentle and

good and patient and unselfish as ever was seen—and not a word from ye back—and I was near turning ye out of the house. But they would not have let ye go—no, no: the rest of the family have some sense, if there's an old woman among them that has no control of herself. But I'll make it up to ye, Ailie—I'll make it up to ye, Ailie, my love——"

Alison, having finished her task by this time, rose and put her arms round the old dame's neck and kissed her.

"Why, it's nothing at all, Aunt Gilchrist," said she lightly. "The best friends quarrel sometimes."

"But I've something in my mind," Aunt Gilchrist said, with a kind of doggedness. "I've something to see to. I'll not let ye run any risk in the future, my lass; there'll be something come of this morning's work; I'll not put ye at the mercy o' burning nerves and ignorant doctors and idiots o' shoemakers. I'll take it out o' my own power to do ye a harm—to do a harm to *you*, my lamb!" She was crying a little in a furtive kind of way. "Things have come to a pass when that was possible! But something will come out o' this morning's work, I'm thinking. There, now," she said, drying her eyes, "give me another kiss, Ailie, and go away and tell the lad John that I'll have a letter ready for him in a few minutes, and he is to take it along immediately to Captain Macdonell. Dear me!" she said, as she rose and took one or two preliminary cautious steps, "what a wonderful, wonderful nice thing it is to be able to walk!" She went more confidently, and with much obvious satisfaction, across the room to the small writing-table. "And if ye see Flora," she added, as Alison was going, "bid her come to me; for I've got to make her hold her tongue."

Thus it was that the long-talked-of visit to Oyre, that had been postponed and postponed, was all of a sudden

resolved upon, as a first act of reparation to Alison for her aunt's evil treatment of her; and right glad was Captain Ludovick to be informed that the old lady and her valuable charges would start with him whenever he pleased. As usual, the Doctor pleaded professional cares; Mrs. Munro was an easy-going, placid, amiable creature, who liked nothing better than looking after her household; Hugh did not seem to see the fun of driving about the country with a parcel of women, and preferred remaining at home with his books; so at last it was arranged that the four of them should form the party—that being a convenient number, besides, for the small waggonette.

On the appointed morning, as the two girls were getting ready, Flora said, laughing, to her cousin—

"I declare to you, Alison, I think Ludovick Macdonell is out of his mind."

"Why?"

"Why? Why, with anxiety about this wonderful visit. He is anxious that you should think a great deal of his father; he is anxious that the old gentleman should be highly pleased with you; he is anxious—about everything! And I have got my instructions, I can tell you; oh yes, he has a fine hectoring way with him when his mind is set on anything; his lordship must have everything done to suit. I've got my orders. I have to prepare you for a little disappointment with the modern look of the house; I have to see that the old gentleman doesn't bore you with his tiger-shooting stories; and I have to take great pains to let him understand that although you come from the south country you are not a low-minded, dangerous, water-drinking Radical. What else? I don't know what else, I'm sure!"

"It's all very well for you, Flora," said Alison, though she was laughing too, "to make a joke of it, but I'm getting thoroughly frightened. It is like going to see

some fearful Bluebeard in a great castle. I would much rather you and Aunt Gilchrist would go, and leave me at home."

"And what would his lordship the young laird say to me if I proposed that to him? I should have my head in my hands, I warrant you! Oh, he is a terrible swash-buckler when his mind is set on anything."

"I don't see how it can be of any consequence whether I think well of his father, or his father think well of me," said Alison; for she was really beginning to regard this visit with some apprehension.

"Neither do I," said Flora bluntly. "I don't see how you can be of any consequence to anybody. You shouldn't be, by rights. But it's just you prim ones, that are all so meek and quiet, that become of mighty consequence to everybody. There's Aunt Gilchrist now; would she ever say she was sorry for scolding *me?* Not a bit; she would be more likely to give me another dose, and say it served me right. But she is all remorse when it is you she has scolded; and last night she was worrying my father's life out to tell her what should be done about her money. Could it be settled by a deed of gift, with her getting so much a year; or was it to be handed over to trustees—and all the rest of it. I know what she was after. Why, you little cat, that money belongs to me!"

"Then you're welcome to it, Flora," said Alison cheerfully, "for anything I care."

Captain Ludovick was favoured with a fine, bright, and breezy morning for this excursion on which he had so eagerly set his heart; and during the long drive he did his best to keep his companions entertained. Aunt Gilchrist, indeed (perhaps because she was wearing cloth shoes), was particularly merry; and Flora conducted herself with her usual happy and careless good-humour; it was Alison alone who seemed to have something on her

mind. And why, she might have asked herself, did she feel a sharp and sudden qualm when the carriage arrived at a great iron gate that was slowly opened for them by the aged crone of a lodge-keeper? The grounds through which they now drove were exceedingly pretty; the sunlight shone on the sycamores and larches and firs, and put bars of gold across the winding road; there were gleams of blue between the stems, telling of the sea-loch that Oyre House overlooked.

"Miss Alison," Captain Ludovick was saying, "do you see that crag there beyond the meadows? That's where the old place used to be—there's only a bit of a ruin there now; and when they came to build the present house I suppose they thought they would give us better shelter this time, for they've gone and jammed us down into a hollow, as you'll see directly."

Just as he spoke they came in sight of a large, plain, square building, whitewashed, but also weather-stained, with an abundance of small windows, each with its prim little blind; a moderate-sized lawn in front; the house itself and its stables surrounded by a thicket of ash and sycamore and larch, through which one could catch a glimpse here and there of the sea. But in spite of the whitewash and the small, plain windows, there was an old-fashioned look about the place; and of course to any one brought up in Kirk o' Shields this large weather-stained building, surrounded by its own meadows and woods, was quite an imposing structure. Perhaps, however, it was not so much of Oyre House as of the old laird himself that Alison was thinking.

Well, in a minute or two they had pulled up at the front door, which was open, and standing there Alison beheld a very striking figure—that of an old gentleman not over middle height, but of remarkably powerful build (like his son, indeed, in that respect), and with long white

hair and long and massive beard, also snow-white. From under his shaggy eyebrows there gleamed a pair of keen and scrutinizing gray eyes; but the aspect of his face was entirely gentle—grave and gentle at the same time—as he came forward to receive them. He was dressed in the Highland costume, of a plain hunting tartan, and almost without ornament.

Flora he knew well enough, so that his greeting of her was of a familiar and friendly character; but to the two strangers he was especially gracious, and Alison was convinced she had never seen any one with a manner so refined and distinguished and courteous. He spoke slowly, and with a marked Highland accent (no trace of which, by the way, was audible in Captain Ludovick's way of speaking), and his voice was persuasive and pleasant to hear. Of course his chief attention was devoted to the old lady; but when they had got into the drawing-room he turned to Alison.

"Indeed," said he, in his slow and gently modulated fashion, "I am glad to hear that you hef been pleased with the Highlands, since it is your first feesit; and I am glad there has been good weather, too."

"I did not know there was any place half so beautiful," said she simply.

"Do you say that now?" he continued—but he was evidently much gratified. "Well, I hef been nearly all over the world; but if there were places that might be considered more beautiful, I was always glad to come back to the Highlands. The Highlanders hef a great many faults; but they are ferry fond of their own country, at any rate. And now that it is not likely I am going away any more, until I am called away altogether, I am well content to spend the last of my days where my forefathers lived before me. It is a quiet place; and when one grows old, one falls into quiet and settled ways; and there are round

you the people you hef known a great many years, so that you live among friends."

"And do you know, Miss Alison, how my father manages to live among friends?" Captain Ludovick broke in. "Why, by ruining an ancient property, that he ought to be keeping together for his only son—that's me. It's very easy to live among friends if you give money right and left wherever it is wanted; if you pension old servants; and reduce and reduce rents if times are bad; and pay premiums for getting boys into situations in Greenock and Glasgow; and have every old woman in the neighbourhood looking to you for a subsistence. Oh yes, you may have plenty of friends that way; and, besides that, you may have it become a byword in the Highlands that the Macdonells of Oyre are as poor as a church-mouse."

"Well, now, that is a fine thing to say!" the old gentleman retorted (though he was clearly far from being displeased by his son's ingenuous flattery). "But what is one to do if you have for a son an idle, worthless lad, who is always going away, and not looking after his own people? Some one must look after them, surely?" He glanced towards the door. "Well, now, this is too much talking to serve for a Highland welcome, and after so long a journey, too. Ludovick, go and see if lunch is not ready yet."

But before Captain Ludovick could cross the room, the booming of a gong in the hall told them that lunch had already been served, whereupon the old laird, with much ceremony, escorted his principal guest to the dining-room, leaving his son to bring in the young ladies. It was not, in truth, a sumptuous banqueting-hall in which the visitors now found themselves. There was a certain air of picturesqueness derived from the tigers' skins and stags' horns that were the chief ornament; but the furniture was of the clumsy old-fashioned mahogany and

horse-hair sort that the modern upholsterer has happily abandoned. But the hospitality that prevailed was of an almost too pressing character; and if the old laird was grieved and disappointed that neither Flora nor Alison would take any of his claret (of which he gave them an ample history) he was delighted with the promptitude with which Aunt Gilchrist declared that, doctors or no doctors, she knew what was due to a Highland house, and would be proud to taste her host's whiskey.

"And I hef seen from my own observation," said he, in his slow, gentle fashion, as he filled her glass from the decanter, "that it is the best drink for both the body and the mind. I neffer knew a man yet that was sound in the body and sound in the mind too—a respectable, religious, good-tempered man—that wass afrait of a little wheeskey. Oh, I know there are some who cry out against it; and, who are they? Why, they are foolish, discontented people, whose body is altogether wrong, and their head too—ill-tempered people—that would hef no government—Radicals, and people of that kind. But I do not wish them any harm; for I take care that they do not come to Oyre; and the world is big enough to hold them and to hold me too."

After luncheon, they went into the hall; and the "last of the old Highland gentlemen," as Hugh Munro was rather fond of calling him, proceeded to descant on the spoils and trophies hanging there, as one after another recalled the various adventures and expeditions of his earlier years. This was what young Macdonell had feared; but he was only successful in carrying off Flora and her aunt (coffee was awaiting them outside, at a little table round which chairs were placed); for Alison, to whom the old laird happened to be talking, made bold to remain with him, and was ready to listen as long as he pleased. For she was very grateful to him for all the kindness he

despising him, they respect him; they do more than respect him: I wish you could hear them talk about him. And I wish you knew him well, Miss Alison; I wish you knew him thoroughly: I think you would like him—or more than like him."

"Indeed, I am sure of that," said Alison quite frankly and cheerfully; for the old gentleman, instead of proving an ogre, had entirely charmed and captivated her by his old-world courtesy and pleasant voice.

"I suppose it sounds absurd for me to talk of my own father in that way," he continued, when he could make sure of not being overheard by those in front; "but the fact is, we have been chums since ever I can remember. He never tried to overawe me; he has rather been a kind of brother and companion all the way through; and I don't know that he isn't the younger man of the two—at least, I know that he has a lighter heart than I have at this moment."

"You?" said she, glancing up in surprise; it was a strange speech for a young man who had always seemed to her the very embodiment of high spirits and audacity and the delight of life.

"His anxieties are all over, mine are only beginning," he said briefly, and then he changed the subject. "Of course you know, Miss Alison, that the heir to a property, however poor and insignificant it may be, is supposed to look with a jealous eye on every penny spent by the owner in possession, unless it's spent on the property itself. Well, not even on that point is there the least difference of opinion between my father and myself. What he is doing now I would do myself. If he were to die to-morrow—and there's not much chance of his dying to-morrow, thank God!—if he were to die to-morrow, and if I were to begin a new way of treating the place, I should deserve to be kicked out of it, neck and crop. And if I

were to marry, my wife would have to be of the same opinion too."

Perhaps he spoke inadvertently, in his eager desire that she should think well of his father; but anyhow a sudden flash of pain shot through her heart. Yes, of course he would marry. He would no longer be the gay young bachelor-friend of the Munroes, and the possible sweetheart of Flora; Captain Macdonell and his young wife would be living here at Oyre, or perhaps away travelling on the Continent; and there would be some kind of barrier between him and his former acquaintances. Young Mrs. Macdonell would have her own companions and intimates when she came to Oyre—Alison could see her clearly, in that brief, sharp instant of forecast. Then quickly she asked him a perfectly irrelevant question about some pheasant-coops they were passing.

So the straggling little group made their idle and gossiping survey of the surroundings of this half-modern mansion and its "policies," though Alison, as her companion fancied, seemed a little absent-minded now. He asked her when she was going away to the south; she said not the next day, but the day after had been fixed for her departure. He said he hoped she would remember the friends she had made in the Highlands; she answered, with downcast eyes, that she was not likely to forget them. And when was she coming back? Well, it would depend on Aunt Gilchrist if ever she came back. Aunt Gilchrist might be coming again in the following summer to see her relatives in Fort William; perhaps she might be asked, too, for a little while, but she could not say. And he, also, grew somewhat silent as they were returning to the house.

As they drew near the lawn again—they were all together now—they had to cross the end of a short avenue of sycamores leading down to the shore, and he said to her—

"If you will come here for a moment, I will show you the old garden; it is very pretty, I think—it won't take you a second."

She followed him, or went with him, rather; and presently he had opened a door in a stone wall all covered with ivy, and allowed her to pass in. It was a quaint, old-fashioned garden, formed on terraces overlooking the sea, and surrounded by this ivy-covered wall that rose, tier on tier, as the various heights demanded. But hardly was she within this enclosure than he put his hand lightly on her arm, and said—

"Alison, you are going away, and this is the only chance I may have of speaking to you. Can't you imagine why I have been so anxious you should come and see Oyre, and get to know my father? Do you think that at some future time—as far away in the future as you like—you could bring yourself to think of living at Oyre, dull as it is? Would it be too dull and poor and wretched? Would the old laird be too terrible a father-in-law to be faced? No," he added, quickly, for she had stepped back a little, quite bewildered, and with her heart beating so wildly that it was impossible for her to speak, "I don't want you to answer me now; you don't know enough about us yet; but I know you; I have been watching all your goodness and gentleness and straightforwardness since ever you came among us; and in the end, if you say no, then there will never be a bride brought home to Oyre. Now, Alison! don't be frightened into a refusal; wait until you know me better; I am content to wait until you say yes; only—only, well, I couldn't let you go away without telling you what I was looking forward to."

What was she to say? Nay, what could she say? In her first alarm and bewilderment she would have shrunk back with a trembling refusal; but he had anticipated that; he did not want her answer now; it was only a

vague dream of his—a wild and impossible dream, it seemed to her—that he had put before her. And then, ere she could speak or attempt to speak, there came a cry down the avenue—

"Alison, where are you?"

Flora appeared at the gate.

"Come along, quick!—there's the most beautiful white peacock on the lawn—the most beautiful creature you ever beheld——"

Flora stopped suddenly, and a rush of blood flew to her face: some suspicion had crossed her mind: but the next instant Alison, though somewhat pale, had put her hand within her cousin's arm, and calmly said—

"Come, then."

The two girls walked on together; Ludovick Macdonell had to stay for a moment to shut the heavy door; then he rejoined them, but without entering into any conversation. They went on towards the lawn, where the white peacock, resplendent of tail, was proudly stalking about; and they found tea waiting for them there, for they were soon to start on their homeward drive.

It was now for the first time that the old laird learned that his son proposed to return to Fort William with these visitors; and in the most gentle way he protested.

"Why, you are a ferry idle boy, Ludovick," said he. "Here are the workmen coming to-morrow, and who should be looking after them but yourself? They will be building for you, and not for me."

Young Macdonell directed one swift glance towards Alison: would she understand that obedience to his father did not mean indifference to her?

"Very well, sir," said he; "if you think I should stay, I will. But I do not know that it is a Highland fashion to let your guests go home by themselves."

"Indeed, Captain Macdonell," said Aunt Gilchrist

promptly, "if ye think we cannot look after ourselves on a bit drive back to Fort William, in the middle of the afternoon, what do ye take us for? And I'm thinking we're already responsible for having made ye waste far too much of your time of late."

"Poor Ludovick is always so extremely busy!" said Miss Flora, with much sympathy; and so that matter was settled; and Captain Ludovick attended them no farther than the lodge-gate, where he stood waving a handkerchief so long as they were in sight.

Now this drive home, along the level shores of the sea-loch, was accompanied by a most remarkable phenomenon. The golden sunset light struck so fiercely on the glassy surface of the water that it was reflected upward, and threw a shadow of the carriage and horses quite distinct from that thrown by the direct rays of the sun; and this ghostly equipage, according to the formation of the ground, would sometimes appear travelling along the lower slopes of the adjacent hill, sometimes along the knolls and crags nearer the road, and sometimes almost coinciding with the much darker natural shadow. This phantasmal, pale-gray *Doppelgänger*, now gliding along those distant golden banks, now coming startlingly near, was altogether a singular and puzzling thing; and it kept both Flora and Aunt Gilchrist abundantly occupied. There were discussions as to the cause of it, and exclamations as it disappeared and reappeared at various distances —in the midst of all which Alison was allowed to sit quite silent and unnoticed. She was supposed to be watching too; in reality she was thinking of far other matters; her memory eagerly recalling every tone and gesture of his appeal to her in the old terraced garden; sometimes her imagination carrying her forward to all kinds of wistful possibilities, and suffusing her eyes with happy tears; and then again an indefinable presentiment

convincing her that all this would prove to be a mirage, an idle dream. But this at least she knew well—that, whatever else might befall her after she had gone away from those friends who had made themselves so dear to her, and from those beautiful scenes in which she had sojourned for a while, whatever else might happen in the harder and harsher world whither she was returning, this she knew, that she had left her heart behind her in Lochaber.

CHAPTER VIII.

"FAREWELL TO LOCHABER."

On the afternoon of the day previous to her departure, Alison was summoned to her aunt's room.

"Now, Alison," said the old dame severely, "ye're not going to make me angry with ye just as ye are leaving; ye've got to put your pride in your pocket and behave like a sensible young Christian, as I have no doubt ye are. Oh yes, Christian enough: I'm thinking they folk in Kirk o' Shields make a fine inroad on your bits o' sixpences for their collections, and subscriptions, and mission societies, and Dorcas meetings, and the like; and ye must remember that the people about here are free-handed in their ways; and when ye're going away, ye must do what's becoming—— "

Alison flushed quickly.

"Yes, aunt; but my father gave me some money before I left—— "

"Yes, yes," said Aunt Gilchrist somewhat dryly, "but the Kirk o' Shields folk and the Highland folk are different. And it's my own pride that's at stake; for you are my niece—my niece with expectations, as the saying is; and I'm not going to allow you to dip into your little store o' pocket-money on my account. Well, ye see, here's a wee bit bag—now, Alison, ye're not to make me angry! I dare ye to quarrel wi' me just as ye're going away!—and ye'll find half-crowns and shillings and sixpences in it: that's for any one that has done ye a civil turn—the

men at the quay, or that rascal John, or the stable lad, if ye see him; and then there's the folk that will help you wi' your luggage to-morrow, and the like. But as for the cook, and as for that clever and willing lass, Maggie, well, I've bought each o' them a printed cotton gown—the parcel's lying there—and ye'll just present it to them in your own name——"

"Aunt Gilchrist, I could not do that!" Alison pleaded.

"But I say ye'll have to do that!" retorted this imperious small person. "I want ye to leave a friendly recollection behind ye; and I will say for these Highland creatures—that they have a long memory for any one that has been civil to them."

"But you're Highland yourself, auntie!" said Alison, who could hardly help laughing at Aunt Gilchrist's assumption of a superior Scotch sagacity and her consequent patronage of the simple-minded Celts.

"Never you mind what I am. Empty that bit bag into your pocket, and take away the cotton gowns wi' ye; and just remember that a friendly word will make what ye give twenty times more welcome."

As it chanced, the first person to come in for his share of these vails was the lad John, whom Alison happened to descry from her bedroom window. He was down at the shore; and as she was rather shy about this unaccustomed duty, she thought she would slip out of the house, and tackle Johnny at once. So she went downstairs, opened the door, crossed the road, and adventured forth upon the rough shingle of the beach.

But what was this that Johnny was about? He had got on to one of the big stones that ran out into the sea, forming a kind of slip, and he had possessed himself of some old basket or hamper, which he was carefully holding down in the water. When he heard footsteps on the shingle behind him, he turned; and the instant he

saw who it was, his broad face grinned joyously and eagerly.

"Come here, mem! Come here, mem, and look at this little duffle! Ah, he's catched now! He'll not be for biting any one's thumb now; no, nor catching you by the foot in the night-time. Look at him, mem!"

Alison had stepped out on the big stones; but she could see nothing through the rough wicker-work of the basket.

"What is in there?" she demanded, becoming instantly suspicious of some demoniac mischief.

"A rat, mem!" said Johnny, with much glee.

"And what are you doing?"

"Oh, well, I am showing him that I am the master now. If his teeth were in your hand, then he would be the master; but now he knows ferry well indeed that I am the master. See this, mem, I can sunk and sunk the basket; and up and up he comes to the top; but he cannot get his head through; and I can sunk him until there is nothing but his nose above the water. Look at him, mem!—look at him! who is the master now, you little duffle?"

"Johnny!" cried Alison in great anger. "It is nothing but horrible and hideous cruelty! Stop it at once! You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"And would there be no cruelty if he could grup ye by the wrist?—and that's what the little duffle would like to do," said Johnny, with wide-staring eyes.

"I will tell Captain Macdonell, and he will give you a good lashing!" she retorted.

"And do you think, mem, that Macdonell likes rats any more as any one else?" said Johnny, still surprised by her interference.

"I know he hates cruelty, and that he will let you know what a horsewhip is!" she said somewhat hotly. "Open that basket at once, and let the poor beast out!"

"Oh, ferry well, mem—you can let him out yourself, if you like," said he, with a grin; and he drew up the basket from the water and placed it on the stone before her.

At this suggestion, Alison shrank back so that she nearly overbalanced herself into the sea, whereupon Johnny only grinned the more.

"No, mem, you do not like him either," said he. "And if I let him out, where will he go? He will go back to the house; and some night, when you are crossing the floor, he will catch you by the ankle or the toes. Yes, and do you know this—that these little duffles have teeth that cross, and when they shut them on you, you cannot get them open again? That's ferry nice, is it not? And if I drown him it's a good chob too!"

"I don't care whether you drown him or not; but you shall not torture him—do you hear?"

"Well, I will gif him a chance for his life—though it's more than he would gif me if he had me by the throat," said John; and therewith he stooped down and undid the bit of string fastening the lid. Then he raised the basket with both hands, and flung it from him into the sea. There was a mighty souse; the lid got partly opened; and presently the escaped rat could be seen making its way ashore, where it presently disappeared among the stones.

"Johnny," said Alison, as they turned away, "why are you such a bad boy? And why are you so lazy? Here's Miss Flora complaining again that you won't keep the borders clipped and the paths tidy——"

"It's Miss Flora's own fault," said John sulkily. "She'll no let me kull the cats. It's the cats that scratches up the gravel and the borders, and she'll no let me kull them."

"But why should you want to kill things?" Alison

remonstrated. "Why should you be so cruel? Now, look here, Johnny, I'm going away to-morrow morning; and I don't know whether I shall ever be back in Fort William; but I should like to think you were behaving better. And here is a little present for you; and a book —it's all about birds and animals, and if you would only read about the care and trouble they take in bringing up their young ones, I am sure you wouldn't harm them."

Johnny professed to accept the half-crown with a great deal of shamefaced reluctance; but the gleam of satisfaction on his face entirely belied him. As for the book, he received that with honest indifference. And yet he was not ungrateful; moreover, he liked Alison, who had been in a measure a kind of chum of his; so, in view of her going away, and with some vague notion of making her a return for these gifts, he asked her if she would like to see a witch.

"A witch?" she said. "Of course not! But what do you know about a witch?"

"There's one in the town," said he, looking round to make sure he was not overheard. "She lifs in a cellar underneath one of the houses. Oh, she iss a fearful woman, that! But if you tek her money, she will gif you something that iss ferry good at night for keeping aweh the ghosts and such things; oh yes, I hef seen it; it iss a bit of an ash-tree and a bit of a rowan-tree, and it iss tied together by a piece of red thread, and there iss red wax on it. You put it on the mantelpiece, and the ghosts are afrait of it; they cannot come into the room either by the window or the door. Will you go and see her?"

"I will not!" said Alison. "Why, you should be ashamed of yourself for fflling your head with such nonsense! Witches and ghosts! I can hardly think that you believe in such stuff."

"Cosh, then, there's more than me believes in them,"

said Johnny, significantly, and therewith their talk came to an end; for they were now arrived at the house, and Johnny went away to put his treasures in a place of safety.

Next morning she was up betimes, and busily engaged in packing; but when that was finished, and as the hour of her departure came nearer, her cheerful composure and self-confidence, which she had striven valiantly to preserve, began to yield a little; and more than once she returned to her own small room, and sat down at the window there, as if she would take a long last look at this beautiful place she was leaving. All shining it was: the sea a plain of palest blue crossed by silver sheets of calm; the rich October tints of the hills—of the withered bracken, and the rowan-trees, and the golden-leaved birch—softened somewhat by a thin dream-like haze. But perhaps it was not merely to impress this scene on her memory that she thus from time to time, and rather nervously, sought the solitude of her own room. The window commanded a view of the road in front in both directions—southward along the shores of the loch, northward to the town and the quay; and she could see any stranger approaching at a considerable distance. And sometimes, amidst all the down-heartedness of her going, she experienced a sudden and joyous elation: it was the very fact of her departure that made it a certainty that Ludovick Macdonell would come to see her; she could not think it possible that he would let her leave for the south without a word or a look of farewell.

In the mean time she had to say good-bye to her Aunt Gilchrist, who was not going down to the quay; and also to the Doctor, who was setting out on his professional rounds.

"Well, now, Alison," her uncle said, "since you know the ways of the house, I hope you will not wait for an

invitation from your Aunt Gilchrist if you should happen to have a few holidays, and would care to come and see us again. You will always be very welcome—you know that. But I think your Aunt Gilchrist will be for asking you to go and see her during the winter—at the Rothesay Hydropathic, most likely; and if you are well-advised you will go, for I understand she is going to have some settlement of her property made. And when she makes you a rich woman, Alison, then you'll come and tyrannize over us just as she does, and we'll all pay court to you, and put up as best we can with your unreasonableness and your bad temper."

"Well, uncle," Alison said, with a smile, "I don't think it is Aunt Gilchrist's money that enables her to tyrannize over you; it is her peripheral neuralgia; and she can't make me a present of *that*. But I'm sure I don't want anything from Aunt Gilchrist—except an invitation now and again; and I hope the next one I get will bring me here, if you will have me."

"Oh yes, we will try to put up with you," her uncle said good-naturedly. "You come and see. And now good-bye, Alison, and take care of yourself; and if you bring back a sweetheart with you, we'll make him welcome too."

Then it was Johnny's turn to take leave of her, in a more secret fashion than was possible down at the quay. He watched his chance, and came quickly up.

"Here, mem! I hef got it for you," said he, in an undertone; and he slipped something into Alison's hand. She looked at it. It was an oblong tin match-box.

"What's this, Johnny?" she said.

"I wass along to the witch," said he eagerly. "And I hef got the thing that will keep the ghosts and ahl the bad things aweh from you at night; and it's in that box; and no one will know but that it iss only matches. Oh

yes, it iss a fine sure thing; you will put it on the mantlepiece at night, and there's not a ghost or anything of that kind will come near you."

Alison hardly knew what to do: she could scarcely refuse a farewell gift, which was probably the most valuable thing the young rascal could think of. Then it occurred to her that perhaps, to obtain it, he had dipped into that little store of money she had given him.

"Did you pay anything for it, Johnny?" she made bold to ask.

"Oh no, mem," he said. "She would not tek money from me, for she comes from my own part of the country. But sometimes I gif her a rabbit, or some such thing; for it iss ahlways better to keep friends with them kind of people. Cosh, that iss a strange thing to think of—a hare eating a rabbit!"

"What hare?" Alison asked in amazement.

"Do you not know that the witches can turn themselves into hares when they like?" Johnny asked; but he was evidently surprised by her extraordinary ignorance. "Ay, ay, and that's the time to catch them, for they cannot do you any harm then." He grinned from ear to ear. "That would be a fine thing now!—to catch one in the streets of Fort William, and to chase her, with a crowd of people ahl with sticks and stones——"

Suddenly Johnny became silent and slunk mysteriously away: he had perceived Miss Flora approaching, and he knew she was almost certain to put him on to some perfectly useless task in the garden; whereas in an outhouse at the back there was a young puppy-dog of a collie that he could spend an agreeable half-hour in tormenting before having to wheel the luggage down to the steamer.

"I suppose you have everything ready, Alison?" Flora said, when she came up.

Alison answered that she had.

"Isn't it strange that Ludovick hasn't put in an appearance?" her cousin continued. "I made sure he would come to say good-bye to you. Those alterations at Oyre can't be of so much importance; though I must say for him that any wish of his father's is law to him. Never mind, Hugh is going with us—think of that condescension!—he is going to see you safe into the railway-carriage, and come back in the steamer with me. This is an assurance of his profound consideration that I hardly ever knew him bestow on any one—any girl—before; and I hope you are grateful. He told me yesterday that you had become quite like one of the family; and that he didn't see the use of your going away at all. Think of that, Miss Dimity! And if you only heard what he has been saying about you to Ludovick——"

Alison started somewhat, and looked apprehensive.

"Oh, a wonderful lot of discoveries, I assure you!—about the expression of your eyes; and how you were always the first to see anything humorous, but you didn't laugh—it was only a little bit of a smile that betrayed you; and what a clear penetration and judgment you had; and how admirable your manner was towards old people—and—and how elegantly you walked—goodness gracious, I don't remember half the pretty things he said!"

"I dare say not," Alison said dryly. "And yet it is very kind of you, Flora, to invent so many."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, how could you know what Hugh said to Captain Macdonell?"

"For the simple reason, my dear Miss Dimity, that Captain Macdonell himself told me; and I can tell you he sets great store by Hugh's opinion, though Hugh is only a boy compared with him. However, that is not

the question. It was Hugh I was speaking of; and you ought to be proud and pleased that he quite approves of you now. Oh yes, indeed; you have won a small share of my lord's condescending notice; you're not half bad to look at, you know, and you've got a very tolerable kind of brain—for a woman. Accordingly, he is going with us on the steamer."

But it was not of Hugh's approval, nor yet of his condescension in coming with them, that Alison was thinking as they walked along to the quay; and while they waited there for the steamer, though she strove to conceal her ever-increasing anxiety, she seemed to see in every distant figure the possibility of its being Ludovick Macdonell. She talked to Flora, she talked to Hugh; but her eyes would go furtively wandering; and as the steamer was now on its way down from Corpach, every moment she became more anxious and perturbed. Now and again she would assure herself that a certain stranger in the distance must necessarily be he; and she would listen to Flora and to Hugh with a forced attention; then it became clear to her that this stranger was only a stranger, and her heart would sink again with its bitter disappointment. Then here was the steamer approaching. Johnny was getting the luggage ready. A small crowd of people had congregated at the end of the quay. The throb of the paddles was becoming more and more distinct; the red funnels were coming nearer and nearer; Hugh would have her stand well out of the way of the ropes; and finally, when the steamer had stopped, and the passengers were getting on board, she knew, as she put her foot on the gangway, that she was going away without even a parting word or a glance.

Up to the last moment she had been in hopes—nay, she had been strenuously convincing herself that it was certain—that he would make his appearance; but now

the gangways were withdrawn, the hawsers thrown from the quay, and the big steamer was throbbing its onward way to the south. She looked at the now fast-receding land, and there was no one there to send her a last token of farewell. And perhaps it was only the fact of her leaving that beautiful neighbourhood—where love had found her, for a brief moment or two, and forsaken her—that made her heart ache so, and caused cruel tears to well into her eyes. She was ashamed, and tried to hide her face from Flora; but her cousin put her hand within her arm.

"Alison," said she, in a very kindly fashion, "I'm not so sorry that you don't like leaving Fort William; but you must just remember that you are coming back; and you are not likely to find the place much changed, or the people either. And the sooner you come back the better. Oh yes, you have made plenty of friends here. It *is* a wonder that Ludovick didn't come to see you off," she continued, in an inadvertent sort of way; "but I suppose he is busy. He did not send you any message, did he?"

Alison shook her head slightly; she could not trust herself to speak just then.

"That is not like him," Flora said. "But then young men are so careless. It's here to-day and gone to-morrow; and you're out of their thoughts five minutes after they've left you. And that's the best way to treat them, I find," she continued, no doubt with the most honest intention of comforting her cousin. "I've never seen the man yet that I would break my heart about; it's much the better way to amuse yourself with them, and let them go, and no harm done. They talk about women being so heartless and fickle: it's absolute rubbish. Trust a man for making love to any woman he meets, and then going off without remembering her name, most likely. The best

way is to treat them as they treat you—get what fun you can out of them, and care no more about them."

But these friendly counsels fell for the most part on an unheeding ear; for Alison, once the cruel pang of disappointment was over, was trying, in rather a dull and hopeless fashion, to find out for herself what was the probable cause of his staying away. Long thereafter she could remember, and with an intense and lurid vividness, every feature and incident and aspect of that dark and miserable southward sail. The day had changed considerably; the fair blue calm was gone; a breeze had sprung up, and there were heavy masses of cloud gathering in the sky; the sea was a moving, stirring plain of pale purplish-gray, with here and there a distant white speck of a yacht. She sat and blankly looked, heavy-hearted enough. And the farther and farther they got south, the day became more sombre, though it was still beautiful in its deep rich tones. For it was not altogether gloom. There were silver gleams among those overhanging masses of cloud; and the violet hills had an occasional streak of greenish-yellow where the misty sunlight fell on the far shoulders. She seemed to be encircled by these hills; and when, getting away down by Appin and Lismore, she turned to have a last glimpse of the pleasant rose-coloured holiday-land in which she had been living, behold! that appeared to be now completely shut off by a wall of mountains, dark-hued and forbidding and stern. Were they enclosing, then, as with an impassable barrier, that fair rose-tinted land—that joyous garden, as it had seemed to her, full of beautiful things and sunlight and pleasant memories? Her heart ached with the throbbing of this steamer that was bearing her away so pitilessly; her eyes were blinded with tears that she could not repress; and these varying winds that came blowing about, if there was any voice in them at all, seemed to be saying,

"*Lochaber no more! Lochaber no more!*" and to keep repeating and repeating the old, familiar, and inexpressibly sad refrain.

From this dull lethargy of grief and aimless conjecture she was soon to be startled by an unexpected revelation brought about in the most casual way. Hugh had gone forward to look after his luggage, for they were now nearing Oban, and Flora took the occasion of his absence to say to her cousin—

"Do you know, Alison, I have thought once or twice that there was something between you and Ludovick; and I'm rather glad to imagine now that there isn't."

Alison, with a quick flush in her face, looked up; but what could she say? There was no confession for her to make. How could there be anything between her and Ludovick Macdonell when he had not even taken the trouble to come and say good-bye to her when she was going away to the south?

"I am glad for this reason," Flora continued in a very matter-of-fact fashion: "You see, it wouldn't matter much to me, or to any girl brought up in a part of the Highlands where there are plenty of Catholics of the better class, and used to meeting them, and not accustomed to put much store by differences of that kind. But for you, Alison, the daughter of a Free Church minister, to marry a Catholic——"

"Flora!" cried Alison, with a sudden strange look in her eyes—"is Captain Macdonell a Roman Catholic?"

"Why, of course! Didn't you know? You must have known!" Flora said, but without noticing the singular expression that had passed so swiftly over her companion's face. "Well, perhaps not. We don't make much of such differences in our house; many of our best friends are Catholics; and I suppose it never occurred to any one to tell you that Ludovick was a Catholic, like the rest of his family. However, I'm very glad his liking for you—

and he didn't make much secret of it, did he?—and his continual talking about you and praising you, I am glad it did not lead to anything more serious; for, you know, your friends in Kirk o' Shields are not so tolerant and Sadducceist as some of us up here, and I dare say they would open their eyes if you proposed to marry a Catholic. I say 'a Catholic,' Miss Dimity Puritan: 'Roman' Catholic is hardly civil."

By this time Alison had effectually regained her composure: outwardly she was quite calm. She knew that the final knell of severance had sounded. Those anxious conjectures as to the cause of his absence were useless now. Nay, was it not better that he should so openly have declared his indifference towards her? That dream was over; and here they were at the quay; and she had some small packages and belongings to look after in the cabin. When they got ashore, she gave Hugh her purse, insisting on paying for her own railway-ticket; she talked pleasantly to them as they went along the platform with her; she smiled a good-bye to them, and waved her hand as the train moved out of the station. And then it was, on suddenly finding herself cut off from these kind friends, and left absolutely alone, that her brave self-confidence, which had sustained her so far, deserted her; a horror of loneliness and blackness and despair seemed to overwhelm her; she buried her head in her hands and broke into a passionate fit of weeping. Yet even then she made a struggle to believe that this that had happened was better so. If there was to be a final renunciation, let it be over and done with. Life would never again be the same for her; certain memories would have to be locked away for ever; she would have to face the remaining years as others had had to face them. But, as the tears rained down her hands, she thought he might have come to say good-bye.

So the train sped on its way, by the placid shores of

Loch Etive, through the gloomy Pass of Brander, under the mighty bulk of Ben Cruachan, and along the wooded banks of Loch Awe; but it was little notice she took of the deep purple hills, the silver-gleaming clouds, the wide rippling waters of the lake, and the gray ruins of Kilchuirn. She sat in a corner of the carriage (fortunately she was the sole occupant, this being an idle time of the year) trying to reason herself out of her childish grief, and resolved to banish this fond illusion that had possessed her for a time. These words that he had spoken to her in the old garden at Oyre?—well, perhaps he had believed them at the moment; it was a passing fancy; she had gone, and he had forgotten them. Flora was right. There was common sense in what she said. All this that had happened was but a dream of beautiful impossibilities; she had left that rose-garden of romance; a wall of dark mountains intervened now; she should return to Lochaber no more. Only the measured rattle of this railway-train was just like the throbbing of the paddles of the steamer; it seemed to keep alive the aching pain at her heart, and she could get no rest.

Station after station went by; sometimes she passively regarded these elderly folk, and wondered whether they had quite forgotten now all the sorrows and vain hopes of their youth. And then, of a sudden, as the train was slowing into Tyndrum station, the colour forsook her face, and her eyes were filled with wonder, almost with fear. That was but for the fiftieth part of a second. She sprang to her feet: "Ludovick! Ludovick!" she cried; her trembling hands pulled at the strap of the window to let it down, and pulled in vain, for she hardly knew what she was doing. But the next moment Ludovick Macdonell was there; and her heart leaped up with pride and joy and gratitude to see how buoyant and confident and assured he looked; the door was opened and he came

lightly into the carriage; and how was she to prevent her face from growing rosy-red or tears of gladness from swimming into her eyes? Nay, she did not try to conceal her joy—she could not; she forgot to ask why or how he had come; it was enough that he was here, and that all the world seemed suddenly full of radiance and happiness. As for him, he was coolly shutting the carriage-door; and then he took the seat opposite her, and put his hand on her hand for a moment, and she did not withdraw it.

"I suppose you wondered why I did not come to see you away at Fort William?" said he (and it was so pleasant to her to hear his voice again: all dark imaginings and griefs seemed to flee away: he brought hope, assurance, confidence with him).

"Oh, never mind," she said, rather incoherently (for she was terribly conscious of the tell-tale colour in her face, and her eyes were cast down lest she should reveal too much of the happy light that was there). "But—but I am so glad to see you for a moment before going home. Yes, I—I expected you to come to say good-bye, and I was—I was a little disappointed; but Flora said you would be busy, and it did not matter."

"It did not matter?" said he in great surprise. "What do you mean, Alison? I think it mattered a good deal. But I did not want to say good-bye to you before all these people; and I knew that Hugh and Flora were going back by the steamer; so yesterday morning I thought I would treat myself to a nice little drive—down Glencoe and across the Black Mount Forest by Inveroran—and take my chance of meeting you in the train. I made pretty sure I should find you."

"And did you come all that way," said she, looking up for a second with something more than gratitude in her eyes, "merely to—to come and see me?"

"To see you?—yes, to have a word or two with you,"

he answered. "For of course I could not let you go away home without some explanation. You see, Alison," he continued, and he took her hand again and held it, "I know I can't make pretty phrases, and perhaps I shouldn't have blurted out what I said to you at Oyre; but now you know—you know what I hope for, and I'll tell you the truth: the real reason why I didn't come to see you this morning at Fort William—the reason why I took my chance of having a word with you in the train, or at the end of the journey, was this, that I wanted to beg from you some kind of a promise—not too definite, if that would frighten you, but still something—something that would assure me that sooner or later—and I would not be too impatient if that vexed you—merely some kind of assurance that sooner or later you would be my wife."

And now for the first moment since she had been bewildered by his sudden appearance, Alison began to recover her senses. She had been so overjoyed at seeing him, after the bitter disappointment of the morning, that she had thought of nothing else. But this prayer of his, that she should, in however vague a fashion, give him some kind of promise, recalled to her in a sufficiently startling manner what she had wholly forgotten—their relative positions, and Flora's warning. She gently released her hand.

"No, I cannot give you that promise," said she, in a low voice and with downcast eyes, "neither now nor at any future time. I—I must be frank with you, for you have been very kind to me. And it is like the rest of your kindness to have taken all this trouble to come and say good-bye, and—it is to be a last good-bye."

"Alison," said he rather breathlessly, "I won't take that as your last word!"

"It is to be the last word," she said, with pale lips.

He wanted to seize her hand again, but she refused.

"Alison," he pleaded, "you must tell me why. I can-

not take it as your last word. If you do not care enough for me at present, then that means that I have spoken too soon, and you will give me a chance and see what time will do. Or is there any one else?"

She shook her head.

"Then why, Alison," he said eagerly—"why should it be all over between us? No, I won't believe it. What is the reason?"

She hesitated for some time; she would rather have avoided the pain of explanation; would it not be better for both that he should simply go away, and that these two should see each other no more? At length she said, rather sadly—

"You never would understand. You don't know how I have been brought up; or how my relations and the people they live amongst look upon a Roman Catholic. It seems quite different in my uncle's family; none of them ever thought of telling me you were a Catholic, until Flora accidentally mentioned it this morning; but now——"

"And is that all?" he exclaimed quickly. "Alison, is that all? Is that your only objection? Did you never hear of Catholics and Protestants intermarrying?"

He seemed quite rejoiced to hear that this was the only obstacle; and it was only by slow degrees, as he pleaded and argued and remonstrated, that he came to perceive how serious a one it was. Nay, he began to feel a little remorse: his eagerness to win her consent seemed to savour of persecution; for she listened so patiently, and yet with such a hopeless silence and sadness, to all his persuasions and prayers. At length he said—

"Alison, if I were secure of your love, I should have no fear that any difference of creed would come between us."

She did not answer.

And then again he said—

"Well, now, I am not going to press you too hard,

Alison, if it is against your will; but you will think over what I have said to you; and mind, I understand more than you imagine about the prejudice against us Catholics that exists among some of the stricter Protestants. I thought you knew all along that I was a Catholic; and if it was only to-day you were told, of course I can understand how you were surprised, and how there has been no time for you to get over your first alarm. I wish you could live in a Catholic district of the Highlands for a year or two; you would find that the Catholics are not a terrible people at all; that they are just as well-meaning and as easy to get on with as any others. But I'm not going to force you to promise anything against your will, Alison; I would rather you would wait and think; and I am not despondent about the result. In the mean time, what am I to do? I had intended going on with you to Kirk o' Shields; I had some vague notion you might introduce me to your family and friends. But I see that wouldn't do at present —that would only embarrass you, wouldn't it? We shall be at Dunblane in a few minutes; will you take it ill if I leave you there?"

She looked at him with kind eyes: she understood his forbearance and consideration.

"Yes, that would be better," she said.

"But I am going to write to you, Alison," said he boldly, "and if I can't persuade you that way, well, then, I must come and see you, and confront the whole clan of your friends, if they are for bidding you beware of a Catholic. Why, in these days it is too absurd to think of religious differences separating human beings who have a real regard for each other. That's all gone and past. And especially you of all people—you, who are so clear-headed —why, if you have acquired any prejudice of that kind, you must have imbibed it unawares; it is something quite foreign to your whole nature."

The train was entering Dunblane station.

"Alison, I will write to you in a few days. Will you answer my letter?"

"Yes, I will," she said; and she regarded him with straightforward and honest eyes, that yet were gentle and kindly too; "but I know what it will be: it will be to ask you to abandon an idea that would only lead to misery —I mean to the misery of many people besides ourselves. That is what I fear—what I know. We will say good-bye now, and it will be better for you to forget that you ever saw me."

"Ah, you are faint-hearted at present," said he confidently and cheerfully; "but wait: wait, and call in your own clear judgment to aid you. And mind, Alison, if you can bring your heart to say yes, you are not going to let it say no because of the opinions or prejudices of your relatives and friends: in that case you will have me coming through to Kirk o' Shields to fight the whole array of them. Well, good-bye, Alison, and God bless you!—it will not be so long before we meet again!"

The little country station was all flooded with the golden light of the afternoon; and in the midst of that glow, for some time after the train had left, she could still make out the well-known, firm-set figure, the sun-browned cheek, and familiar Tam o' Shanter. And when at length she was left alone with her own thoughts, her heart was far less heavy than it had been during the earlier part of the day. Severance—the bitterness of renunciation—might be before her; nay, she had already faced that as a certainty, and with a sufficiency of courage. But however dark and hopeless the future might be, at least, here and now, she knew she had not been mistaken in her friend; and she was proudly conscious that, whatever else might be in store for her, to be slighted and forgotten by Ludovick Macdonell was the last thing she had to fear.

CHAPTER IX.

THE COWANS OF CORBIESLAW.

On the bleak uplands lying to the east of Kirk o' Shields stands the farm-house of Corbieslaw. It is a dismal and lonely place; the buildings and byres all of stone and slate; not a tree or a bush anywhere around; while its considerable acreage of arable and pasture land is divided, not by hedges, but by stone walls as grimy and melancholy-looking as Corbieslaw itself. No birds sing here in spring or summer. The fumes and smoke of Kirk o' Shields keep an almost perpetual grayness in the skies, save at night, when the dull red glow of the distant iron-works flushes across the darkened heavens.

One afternoon, some few days after Alison's return from the Highlands, Alexander Cowan of Corbieslaw was standing at his own front door. He was a man of about sixty; a huge, heavy, unwieldy-looking person, sallow-complexioned, large-eared, thick-lipped, with nostrils like those of a monkey, and with small, twinkling vindictive eyes—eyes that, compared with the extent of his face, somewhat resembled those of an elephant, and seemed capable, like those of an elephant, of preserving a pretty accurate recollection of any one who had injured him. Mr. Cowan was not in his ordinary farmer dress; he was clad in a loose, ill-fitting suit of Sunday black; he was carefully shaved; and he would no doubt have been grave and solemn of demeanour but that the unaccustomed stiffness of his shirt-collar seemed to irritate him considerably,

producing from time to time (as he was vainly endeavouring to set matters right) an expression of anger that ought not to have appeared on the face of a ruling elder of the Free Church.

Presently he was joined by his wife—a little, thin, sharp-looking woman, with a profusion of shining black bugles about her dress, and a mass of artificial roses and fuchsias in her bonnet.

"I hae just been thinking, Mysie," said he, in a slow and oracular fashion, which would have been more impressive but that in speaking he added an "h" to every "s," so that the continual "hish-hish" sounded as if his mouth was full of boiled turnip; "I hae just been conseedering that the Minister cannot tak' it ill that we should approach him on this subjeck, for there's plenty o' Scriptural precedents for it; I could gie him chapter and verse a dizzen times ower, if it was needed. But e'en without that he maun see how it will be a strengthening o' the Lord's Church through faimily bonds. Ay, through faimily bonds. When ye're putting off your bonnet, Mysie, or when ye're coming away at the end o' the evening, ye'll be seeing the lass by hersel'; and ye can gie her a bit hint to remember what I hae done for her faither in times past; and ye can show her what a bringing thegither o' the two faimilies would be in the future—a bulwark and a surety, and a warning to they ill-thrawn folk that would tear the congregation to pieces wi' their bickerings and yaumerings. She's a sensible kind o' lass; she'll understand ye, I warrant. As for the Minister, I'll hae a word wi' him when ye're out o' the room; though it's no the first—no, no—weel he kens what we've had in our mind; but maybe I'll speak a bit plainer, ye see. Ay, and I shouldna wonder if it was borne in on him that this thing came from the Lord; as Laban and Bethuel said to Abraham's messenger, that went on a like errand. 'The thing proceedeth from the

Lord: we cannot speak unto thee bad or good.' That's the main point to remember. I say it would be for the benefit of the Church at lairge, and our own East Street Church in parteeclar; and everybody kens what a fecht I've had, in upholding the Minister through good report and bad report; for he has his enemies, poor man, and ill-wishers—they heedless young fellows, that think nothing o' the fundamentals o' their faith, but are aye crying out about the elocutioners and poetry-mongers they've heard in Glesca. Oh ay, the Minister kens what I've done for him."

"I'm sure it would be a very good thing for James," observed Mrs. Cowan, who spoke Edinburgh-wise, and with more pretensions to elegance than her husband. "They say that Alison Blair will have nearly everything her aunt has to leave; and it's no concern o' ours whether the money came frae a distillery or not. It would be a fine thing for James; for a young probationer with a wife that is known to be well provided for is regarded wi' favour, and has a better chance of a call: the responsible members o' the congregation understand that the young lasses will no be a' setting their caps at him; and, besides that, he will be able to keep up a proper style, and have entertainment for his friends, and no be aye begging and begging for an increase o' stipend. Poor James—look at him now! Many's the time my heart is sore to think of the poor lad slaving away at they sermons, that nobody ever asks him for. He is just that diligent; but what's the use? It's a' very fine to call the probationers 'guinea-pigs'; I would like to see more o' the guineas; but not one has he had; and there's Mr. Blair—you would think he might go away for a single Sabbath, just to lend his pulpit to the lad, to say nothing o' the guinea as a kind of encouragement. But no. And how do they expect a probationer to become a capable preacher if they never give him the chance of a pulpit?"

Now, during this sympathetic speech the farmer's face had been growing more and more morose; and at last he said sullenly—

"He would hae made a chance for himself, if he hadna been such a poor, feckless, helpless, spiritless crayture."

Then fierce as fire the mother retorted, in defence of her first-born—

"And if he is that, who made him that? Ay, well ye ken who made him what he is!"

"I have brought him up as a child should be brought up," the farmer said sternly, "in the fear of the Lord."

"In the fear of a whip-lash!" was the angry rejoinder; and then she proceeded, with bitter vehemence: "Yes, it is well for you to complain now when ye've crushed and cowed the spirit out o' the poor lad all his life long! The fear of the Lord? The fear of a whip-lash—that's what I call it; and the fear of being locked up among the rats in an empty barn, night after night, for just nothing at all. You may have forgotten, but I've not forgotten, the time ye went to fetch him home frae Garlieston—driving him before ye wi' a horse-whip—you a great big man, and him a little white-faced boy. No wonder the folk turned out and followed ye, and hooted ye, and threw stones at ye!"

The small eyes in the farmer's big, coarse face had grown darker and darker.

"If I had got my whip round their legs," he said, between his teeth, "I'd hae sent that Irish rabble skelpin' back to their ain business. Here, Rob!" he suddenly roared to a servant-man who chanced to come along. "Go round to the yard, and tell that fellow Chalmers that if I'm kept waiting here anither three minutes for that dog-cart he'll be out o' my service the morn's morning, as sure's there's a sky aboon our heads!"

But just at this moment the dog-cart opportunely made its appearance; and at the same time the sound of the

wheels brought forth from the house the young man who had been the subject of the recent altercation. This James Cowan—the Rev. James Cowan he was called by courtesy—was rather under middle height, slight of physique, and stooping a little; with a pale complexion, a large, weak, sensitive mouth, a feeble jaw and chin, no great height of forehead, and lank fair hair that he wore long behind. But what was chiefly noticeable about him was the curiously vacuous expression of his face, coupled with the quick and furtive look of his eyes. It was not an intelligent look; but at least it was alert and observant —like the apprehensiveness of some dumb animal that has just been beaten, and is on the watch for the reappearance of the stick—and it did something to relieve the hopeless apathy of his features. For the rest he also was clad in black; but with no touch of the smartness and neatness natural to a young man; and without a word or a sign to any one he took his place on the back seat of the dog-cart, where he was joined by the farm-servant, when the farmer and his wife had got up in front. Then they drove away in the direction of Kirk o' Shields.

No one spoke during the drive; and at length, when they had got near to the town, the farmer pulled up and called to his man to come to the horse's head. Then they all descended and proceeded on foot.

"Such nonsense!" Mrs. Cowan said snappishly.

"Oh, I ken what ye would be at!" her husband retorted (though probably he was still brooding over the recollection of his having been hooted through the outskirts of Garlieston). "I ken ye would like to show off before the folk, and gang trantling through the town in your ain machine. It's little of the proper humeelity of a Christian that ye care for. But if I have to use a dog-cart in the exercise of my earthly calling, I hope I ken my duty better than to go clattering through the streets

wi't, as if I was one o' they tearin', swearin' officers out o' Millhill barracks."

So it was on foot that they arrived at the Minister's house, whither they had been invited to take tea and spend the evening. Alison, of course, was the young house-mistress; and she received her guests with the respect and attention due to the farmer's position as an elder—and a very important elder—in the Church; she had also a kind and encouraging word for the poor lad James, who seemed glad to get away from her, and to subside into a corner, where he sat with his eyes mostly fixed on the floor.

"And how did you enjoy your stay in the Highlands, Miss Blair?" said Mrs. Cowan, who was extremely polite on such occasions.

"Oh, very, very much!" Alison said with a quite unlooked-for enthusiasm. "They are the very nicest and kindest people I have ever met."

But here the farmer interfered with portentous severity—

"I'm sorry to hear ye say that, Miss Blair—sorry indeed. If ye kenned them better, ye would be of a different opinion, I'm thinking; ye would understand that they are of the same race as the Irish; and they're a' tarred wi' the same stick—a godless, drucken, swearin', dangerous class o' people, that are the plague of any decent and respectable community that takes them in. Wha fills the police-courts? Ask the Glesca magistrates! And here in this very town our lives are hardly our ain for they Irish scoondrels frae the pits and the iron-works, a cursin', drucken, riotous crew, Roman Catholics every one o' them, and ready to smash every window in your house if they see an orange lily in your gairden. Sometimes I think that it's a dispensation and a trial that the Lord in His mercy has put upon us—just to remind us what it would be if they blagyards got the upper hand,

and could bring the Pope ower here, and have us burned at the stake for reading the Word. And the Hielanders, as I have heard, are just the same, root and branch, as the Irish—a reckless, quarrelsome, idle crew; and not a word they say to be believed; for the truth is not in them."

"Have you ever been in the Highlands, Mr. Cowan?" Alison asked sharply—but rather despising herself for caring.

The farmer hesitated, for he had never been in the Highlands; but his wife came to his assistance.

"I'm sure what Alexander says is true," Mrs. Cowan remarked. "I know that I had a Highland servant once, Miss Blair; and sure I am there never was such another creature born alive. Not but that the woman would work—ay, and get up at any hour; and the strength of a stot she had; but mercy me, her tantrums! Ye had but to check her wi' a word, and off she'd go wi' her head in the air, muttering and storming to herself in Gaelic, and making use of language just fit to make your blood creep——"

"But how do you know it was bad language, when you could not understand it?" Alison asked—and she dared not look at her sister Agnes, or she would have burst out laughing.

"I am sure it was bad language—I am confident it was: you could tell it well enough by the sound if not by the sense," said Mrs. Cowan; and with that oracular utterance this disquisition on the Highland character came to an end, for the buxom and black-eyed wench Katie here opened the door and announced that tea was ready.

Now when they had gone into the dining-room and taken their places, and when the long grace was ended, the farmer's wife ran her eye over the table.

"I hear, Minister," said she complacently, "that in your visiting last week ye included Mrs. Strachan?"

The Minister intimated that he had called upon Mrs. Strachan.

"And she gave ye *blamanj?*" continued Mrs. Cowan, with a playful smile.

The Minister had not noticed, or failed to remember.

"Oh yes, I heard about it," said Mrs. Cowan, still smiling facetiously. "And maybe it did not turn out very well; maybe it was not very well made? *Blamanj*—Mrs. Strachan: I like that! Mrs. Strachan trying her hand at *blamanj*—and her mother kept a wee bit box o' a place in a back-wynd in Airdrie, and selled aipples and ginger-beer!"

The incongruity between Mrs. Strachan's origin and her social pretensions seemed to afford Mrs. Cowan much amusement; but her husband tacitly rebuked her for her frivolity by abruptly changing the subject, and showed a better appreciation of the character of the house he was in by reverting to the Minister's forenoon sermon on the previous Sunday.

"I wouldna presume to criticeese, Mr. Blair," said the elder, solemnly and slowly; "and the doctrine o' grace irresistible is not one that any professing Christian would dispute; but yet to lose sight o' works athegither is a sair temptation, I'm feared, to them that are naitrally inclined to back-sliding. Nae doot it is the province o' a minister o' the Gospel to preach the truth as it is delivered to him——"

"Ay, but there's another thing," interposed the elder's wife eagerly. "When our James gets a call, I know he'll put two duties before him—one to preach the truth, and the other to help to sweep away that perneecious stumbling-block, the Estayblished Church."

The farmer went on without heeding this unseemly interruption—

"But I wouldna have the believer grow slack in well-

doing. Ye remember what Paul says to the Philippians. 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.'"

"And I am sure you do not forget the very next verse, Mr. Cowan," the Minister said, calmly regarding his interlocutor from under his shaggy eyebrows. "'For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.' You cannot think that mortal man can win such a great prize as eternal salvation by his own weak endeavour?"

"I would just like to hear our James on that point," again interposed the fond mother. "James is just a wonderfu' arguer when ye give him time. James, tell them what's your opinion on that point."

James, startled out of his apathetic reverie, looked round him with frightened eyes; but said nothing. His father took no notice of him whatsoever; he continued his discourse, now with an appeal *ad rem*.

"This is what I'm driving at, Mr. Blair," said he, "that if the believer is not reminded that works are an outward and visible sign of grace, and demanded of the professing Christian, then he may grow slack in conduct, and do just as others do. Now it's no more than three days since I was gaun by Steel and Dalrymple's boiler-works; and I happened to keek ower the wa', and there was John Ramsay, jist outside the engine-house where he is employed. Think ye what he was doing? He had a bit cotton-waste in one hand and an oil-can in the other, and he was puttin' drop after drop on to his boots and polishin' them up. Think o' that! What's that but stealing his employers' property? And here's a man that washes his face, and puts on his Sabbath clothes, and brings his wife and his twa sons and dochter into the pew wi' him: yet he doesna think twice about stealing his masters' oil to put on his boots. 'Deed, I was thinking o' going into the office and telling them what was going on——"

"I hope you will not do that, Mr. Cowan," said the Minister, in his grave, deliberate way. "It's a small matter; maybe it is the usual custom in the works; and in any case it is too trifling a thing to make mischief about."

"Lax—lax," said the elder, shaking his head mournfully; "it's the little things that lead to great things when they're overlooked. There's the mistress, now: last Sabbath morning she catched one o' the lasses singing away at 'Ye banks and braes'—on a Sabbath morning!—and only said 'Be quiet,' or something o' that kind, without a word o' serious remonstrance. What then? Would ye believe it, Mr. Blair, as I was gaun by the kitchen-door on Wednesday nicht, I just lookit in, and there, as sure as I'm leevin', were the three hizzies playing cards—*playing cards!*"

"Cards, Minister!" almost shrieked Mrs. Cowan (while the guilty Alison sat and listened, thinking of those magical evenings away in the north, with the scent of roses in the garden, and the twilit heavens shining silver-clear over the hills). "Cards!—in a house where there was a minister o' the Gospel, or one that's soon to be a minister, ordained and inducted in proper form. James, what was't ye said about Satan having pented mass-books as well as the Pope? Oh ay, he can give the Romans a slap when he likes! What was't, James?"

But even with this encouragement James failed to respond, for the eyes of his father were upon him for a brief moment. Then the elder resumed.

"No, Mr. Blair, I do not hold wi' them wha say that works are a sinfu' endeavour to defeat the divine power o' grace; and I would rather see the professing Christian declare the faith that is in him by outward observances. Six days shalt thou labour; and as long's I'm master in my own house there'll be no cloth laid on the Sabbath-day; them that winna tak' the trouble on the Saturday can gang without their dinner on the Sabbath."

"Look at Alexander himself, Minister," said Mrs. Cowan, proudly—she had forgotten for the moment about Garlieston, and the horsewhip, and the empty barn. "Do ye mind the Sabbath morning he came into the church wi' only the one side o' his face shaved? Little did he heed the sniggering o' the young lads and lasses! I say that a man that is shaving himself on the Saturday night to avoid all labour on the Sabbath, and has to stop in the middle when he hears twelve o'clock striking—a man that is so parteeclar in small things will cling to the essentials as well; and I hope our James here, though he may rise in the world, and become famous, and get into a different station from ordinary folk like us—I hope he'll be as good a Christian as his father was before him, and no be ashamed to walk in his footsteps."

At this point the Minister, perceiving that tea was over, returned thanks in a long and earnest appeal for further and spiritual mercies; then the table was cleared, and the small company devoted itself to improving conversation. And at last the doting mother had her chance. Having several times failed to get her son James to open his mouth, she at length worried him into declaring what the subject of his last manuscript sermon was; then she appealed to the Minister; and Mr. Blair was kind enough to examine the young man as to the argument he had followed in that composition, the "heads" into which he had divided it, and so forth; and James was constrained to answer. Mrs. Cowan was a proud woman as she sat and admiringly listened. Nearly all the talking, it is true, was on the side of the Minister; but was it not a noble spectacle to see those two members of the highest of all professions conversing with each other, and one of them her own son? She would not allow the farmer to interrupt. When he would have relegated James to the background and his accustomed silence, she valiantly interposed and

invoked the aid of the Minister himself. The subject of the sermon was the duty of Christians to make manifest the truth one to another; there were five "heads;" and the Minister was most considerate and painstaking in following the line of treatment and in expressing approval where that could be awarded.

(And of all this what did Alison hear? Why, not one word. Her heart was far away in Lochaber. This was not Kirk o' Shields at all—Kirk o' Shields on a dull afternoon deepening into dusk, and the figures in the small parlour become almost as ghosts in the twilight: this is the Doctor's garden, overlooking the shore, and she is standing in it quite alone. Everywhere there is an abundance of motion and change on this bright and windy morning; the far ranges of hills are dappled with yellow sunlight and purple cloud-shadows; torn shreds of white stretch across the pale blue sky; a deeper blue stirs and trembles in the driven water of the loch. The flowers are all nodding and bending before the breeze; sometimes a few drops of rain begin to mark the lilac-gray pebbles at her feet; sometimes there is a brief gloom overhead; then the bit of a shower drifts over; the warm sunshine spreads itself around; the petals of the flowers are glittering now, and the pendulous branches of the willows rustling; while the air is freshened with the scent of rain-wet roses and sweetbrier. What is this she hears? The window of Flora's room above her is open; perchance, for it is yet early, her cousin is combing out her long coal-black hair as she lightly sings—

"O where hae ye been roaming, roaming, roaming,
O where hae ye been roaming, my bonny Mary Graham?"

And Ludovick—why does not Ludovick put in an appearance, coming along from the town by the white road that skirts the beach? They should be going sailing on so fair a morning. Has she the courage to cut a rose for him—

one of those deep red ones, with rain diamonds on its closely folded petals—and to offer it to him as he comes in at the little gate? Flora would laugh, perhaps; but he would be proud enough. Ah, no, she has not the courage; she must not make confession; the white road is empty; and the day somehow changes in this wistful dream. There are dark clouds overhead now; and there are hurrying people at the quay; and a wild agony of farewell, and streaming eyes, and an aching heart. "Lochaber no more," the restless winds are wailing; "we'll maybe return to Lochaber no more." The black wall of mountains comes between; the fair and joyous garden-land, with all its new wonders and gladnesses of life, with all its secret hopes and thrills, is lost to her for ever; there remains for her but a bewildering memory, and the hopeless desolation of Kirk o' Shields. These voices in the small parlour convey nothing to her. She is wondering what Flora is doing; what Hugh is doing; whether either of them ever thinks of her. And Ludovick?—perhaps there is a letter already on its way to her, with some word of kindness, of remembrance.)

Late in the evening the Corbieslaw people rose to go; and then it was, on her retiring to put on her bonnet and shawl, that the farmer's wife had an opportunity of talking to Alison alone. But Mrs. Cowan had a wholesome opinion of her own shrewdness, and considered that she knew a great deal better than her husband how to conduct this delicate negotiation. She had no intention of telling Alison that she ought to marry James for the greater good of the Free Church of Scotland, and in order to strengthen the elder's position in her father's congregation. That was not the kind of lure with which to captivate the imagination of a young maiden. She relied rather on the abundant store of napery at Corbieslaw, of which she kept an accurate list in her mind. But before

coming to that, she had to make some kind of apology for her vicarious interference.

"Ye see, Miss Blair," she said, when she had introduced the subject in a skilful and diplomatic manner, "a young probationer is naturally timid when he comes to a minister's house; and as for yourself, you are much looked-up to by the whole congregation; and James is a modest lad, and maybe does not think of himself just what he might; so that if I speak for him ye'll no misunderstand his hanging back a little."

"I think if he was very anxious he would speak for himself," Alison observed, with much composure; "so wouldn't it be better to say nothing more about it?"

"No, no; don't put it off like that, and do the lad an injury because he is modest and well-behaved," the fond mother pleaded. "It's not the glib ones that can talk your head off that make the best and steadiest husbands. Of course he'll speak to you himself; but I thought I would like to have just a bit chat wi' ye; for it would be a great comfort to us to know that Corbieslaw would be well looked after when we are gone, even if ye selled the lease o' the farm, and only kept the house. I couldna bear to think of my store o' napery being put to the roup and scattered among other folks' drawers and presses. Just consider this, Miss Blair——"

Here followed an imposing catalogue to which Alison duly listened—and not without interest, indeed, for she was a house-mistress herself.

"Ye see, it is not as if ye were being asked to marry a young man with his way in the world to make," continued Mrs. Cowan, "and nothing to back him. I'm sure enough in my own mind that James will take a high position in the Church, for he is well grounded in the Latin and Greek, ay, and Hebrew too, and he's just that convincing when he brings his logic to bear; but in the mean time,

while he is waiting, his father and myself will see that he doesna want. An only son too—I suppose ye hardly remember his brother Andrew, that was to have had the farm, poor lad, but was taken away in that terrible veesitation of diphtheria? Ay, he was a bonny boy, my poor Andrew; but he never had James's head; ye'll see what James will come to some day, Miss Blair: he'll make folk talk about him, I'm thinking."

"I'm sure I hope so, if that is his ambition," said Alison; "but really, Mrs. Cowan, I don't see why I should be expected to marry Mr. James, or anybody else."

"Your father is an old man, Miss Blair," said the farmer's wife, significantly.

"I trust he may live for many years yet," Alison said, "but even if anything were to happen to him, I suppose I could earn my own living, like other people."

"How? Ye've been gently brought up, Miss Blair," her monitress continued. "I wouldna like to see you slaving away at needlework, or teaching, or whatever a young lady could turn her hand to."

"I'm not afraid," Alison said, simply enough. "And anyhow I'd rather do that than marry in order to be well provided for."

"Not if it was your father's wish?—if he wanted to see you comfortably settled?"

Alison was perceptibly startled.

"Why, who said that?" she demanded.

And here Mrs. Cowan not only followed, but considerably bettered, her husband's instructions, and allowed her fancy a little range in interpreting the Minister's hopes and wishes in this matter. Alison was surprised; but she had no reason to disbelieve; for there was but little mutual confidence between her father and herself; and indeed this was about the last subject that either of them would have mentioned to the other. Alison was surprised,

no doubt; but she was not alarmed; in fact, when, after some further representations and persuasions from the farmer's wife, they both of them returned to the parlour, Alison could hardly help regarding with a mild curiosity the young man whom they all seemed to wish her to marry. She felt no dislike to him at all; there was rather in her breast a kind of wonder; and when she shook hands with him at the door, as they were going away, she glanced at him again with not a little interest: was this her possible husband, then?

When she got back into her own small room, to think over this project, she was rather amused than disconcerted by it. It was too ludicrous to be possible. Wandering about her head was the proud fancy that if the whole congregation were banded together in a conspiracy to make her marry this poor lad of a probationer, she would be safe enough, for Ludovick Macdonell would come to rescue her. Nay, she could imagine the simple ceremonial about to begin; friends and relatives assembled in the largest room in her father's house; she and this poor lad, far more tremulous than herself, standing side by side; the Minister confronting them, and about to lecture them on the duties of wedded life. But behold! the door opens; Ludovick appears—regarding these people as if amazed at their astounding insolence; he parts them right and left with his broad shoulders as he makes his way to her; there is a laugh of recognition when he meets her eyes; he seizes her hand, and, without a word or a glance to any one but herself, leads her away.

Leads her away—but whither, and to what end? And indeed she might have proceeded to ask herself what Ludovick could have to do with her at all, seeing that in her own mind she had already composed an answer to the letter which every morning she now expected to receive from him.

CHAPTER X.

HITHER AND THITHER.

THIS answer that she had already constructed was pitilessly clear and logical; and was designed to convince him that difference of creed put an insurmountable barrier between them, and that he would best consult the happiness of both by abandoning forthwith what could only prove a futile fancy. But all the while that she was formulating this argument (during many an anxious and silent hour, that caused her sister Agnes to wonder why Alison should have come back from the Highlands so preoccupied and thoughtful) she could not conceal from herself that it was based, not so much upon any convictions of her own, as upon the convictions of her friends and relatives, and of the people among whom she lived. For what was her own attitude towards the Catholic Church, when she came to consider it dispassionately, and as she strove to free herself from those mists of prejudice in which she had been brought up? In former days, when she had been first alarmed by Paley's "Evidences," she had sought refuge in authority. Who was she, she naturally asked herself, to set up her private judgment, and question truths that had been accepted by those who had devoted their whole lives to the investigation of these supreme matters? What learning, or knowledge, or critical faculty had she, that she should question, for example, the conclusions arrived at by the Westminster Assembly of Divines? And now, when she came to

regard the Catholic faith, if authority was to be her safeguard and chief good, what more august authority could she find than in the religion that had held Christendom for century after century, dowered with the majesty of unbroken tradition, and ever ready to receive into its haven any poor wandering soul that had been tossed about on the seas of perplexity and doubt? In that haven the greatest intellects of many lands had found security and rest and consolation: why should she hesitate to believe what they had believed? No, it was not her own attitude towards the Catholic Church that caused her answer to Ludovick Macdonell to shape itself so clearly into a refusal; it was the knowledge that if she married a Catholic, her nearest relations would be shocked to the heart, her friends and acquaintances would consider her as one abandoned and lost, while the congregation that sat and listened to her father's preaching from Sabbath to Sabbath would be astounded that the Minister should have been so failing in his private duties as to allow one of his own household to stray away into the camp of the enemy.

And yet when Ludovick Macdonell's letter did arrive she tore it open in haste and glanced over its contents with a breathless anxiety. To her extreme surprise she found there was nothing argumentative or polemical in it; he appeared to have taken it for granted that that was all gone and finished—that the representations he had made to her in the railway-carriage would prove to be sufficient when she had time to consider them calmly; and now his appeal was all to her heart instead of to her head. Certainly he did once revert to the fact of their belonging to different faiths, or to different versions of the same faith, but only to repeat what he had said before, that in these days of religious toleration and of individual liberty difference of creed was a wholly minor matter,

that need never dislocate the relations between two persons who otherwise were at one. He did not seem in the least to understand the situation in which she found herself placed. All he wanted was that she should say yes, and forthwith and joyfully he would begin to make preparations at Oyre for the reception of the bride. What more simple? His father would be delighted, he said. He had put his hopes and plans before the old gentleman, who, he confessed, was at first inclined to rebel, for there had been another project in his mind; but the Herr Papa was won over at last, was forced to admit that he had been greatly charmed with the young lady who had visited Oyre that autumn, and finally said, "Bring her home as soon as you like, Ludovick, and I will take the rooms overlooking the kitchen-garden, so that practically you'll have the whole house to yourselves."

"But that's not my scheme at all," continued Captain Ludovick. "Fancy, now, this morning I had to go out in search of my pa, having some business to talk over; and where do you think I found him? All by himself up at the edge of the plantations, engaged in clearing the dried leaves and weeds out of the surface-drains with his stick—you remember the stick with the panther's claw set in silver? That's a fine occupation for the old laird of Oyre, isn't it? But I could imagine something much better than that for him. I could imagine him, on a warm afternoon, walking up and down the little avenue, under the shade of the sycamores; a young lady with him and clinging to his arm—a very pretty young lady, with the clearest and kindest of gray eyes, and the demurest of dimples in her cheek, and the most bewitching smile, and dark hair so neatly and nicely braided under a white Tam o' Shanter—and him telling her splendid and awful lies about the jungle, and her listening and believing every word, and pleasing him mightily. Can you

guess who she was? I could see her quite clearly. Yes, and I could see Flora and Hugh come driving up in a dog-cart, and get down with their rackets in their hands; then the young lady in the white Tam o' Shanter must needs fly away and get a cigar, and the *Inverness Courier*, and some whiskey and water for the old gentleman, and put them on a small table in front of the house; and then she joined the others, all determined to get three sets of tennis played before going in to dinner. And if the old gentleman, in the heat of the afternoon, let his cigar go out, and fell asleep behind the newspaper, at all events he was in good company, and more comfortably occupied than in pottering about all by himself and clearing dried leaves out of drains."

Alison turned from this letter with a sigh, and took up its fellow that had arrived by the same post. It was from Flora—sent at Ludovick's urgent request. And it was written in a very different key, for Flora seemed to perceive a great deal more clearly than the headstrong lover the difficulties with which Alison was surrounded, though, to be sure, she made light of them also, in her happy-go-lucky fashion.

"DEAR ALISON,

"I hate you. You have turned the best fellow in the world into a bore. I try to shunt him on to Hugh, who is quite sympathetic and agrees; for I am not sympathetic and don't agree, and decline to believe that you are the most wonderful creature that ever came into this wearyfu' world. However, that's neither here nor there. My lord has given me his orders. I am to write at once and convince you that there is nothing to hinder a Protestant and a Catholic from marrying each other. He says you didn't know he was a Catholic until the very day you left—when he played us that pretty trick by cutting across through

the Black Mount Forest—and that you seemed quite upset by the discovery. But what does it amount to, if you two pretty dears really care for each other? Here's my solution of the difficulty. If you think that husband and wife must necessarily be of the same faith, why don't both of you agree to join the Church of England, which is a nice, convenient, Half-way House between Protestantism and Catholicism? Isn't that sensible? At the same time I see no reason why you shouldn't marry and remain Protestant and Catholic just as you are; I don't believe the difference would come into your actual lives at all; and there's one very certain thing, you need have no fear about the priests interfering with your domestic affairs or relations. Oh no; my worshipful gentleman has a *tolerably stiff neck;* and he has a kind of notion that his house is to be his own, and himself undisputed master of it. There won't be any cowled monk coming out from a sliding panel at Oyre, or any kind of foreign dictation or interference, you may depend on that. Indeed, so far as your being a Protestant and his being a Catholic is concerned, I don't see why there should be any trouble at all—any more than the same difference affected your friendly relations with him when you were here, and when you didn't even guess at its existence—and if you were only to consider your two selves, everything would be clear enough.

"But oh, Alison Blair, when I think of you forsaking all the preachings and teachings of your forefathers, and bidding defiance to the amazement and horror and bewailing of your friends and family, then it's quite another matter; and I'm not going to advise you, however Ludovick may beg and implore. For he doesn't understand, and that's the truth, or else he's so headstrong that he won't pay any heed. My goodness, the ghosts of all the Blairs of Moss-end would rise from their graves, and

point their snaky finger at you, and sing psalms of lamentation (tune, *Coleshill*). And then the congregation, and the elders, and the elders' wives, and Agnes too—what would she say? Your joining hands at the Half-way House would be no kind of concession to them. What? the daughter of Mr. Blair of East Street Church gone away and become an Episcopalian!—you might just as well become a Catholic at once. Of course, Ludovick won't hear of all this; but I know more than he does about the Free Kirk folk here—I hear plenty about them from my father; and if you mean to do this thing, you will have to pull yourself together to face the consequences.

"Well, now, my dear Miss Dimity, this is all I have to say by way of warning, and I've freed my conscience. No doubt it has all been present to your mind; for you know the conditions far better than I do, and no doubt you have been considering. But at the same time I must honestly tell you that if this affair between Ludovick and you is *very, very* serious—and he *appears* to take it seriously—I wouldn't be frightened of these dire consequences, if I were in your position. No, I wouldn't. If I cared for a man, I wouldn't pay much attention to what the East Street elders and their wives said about either him or me. But then I should have to care for him *a good lot*, and if your interesting little entanglement with Captain Ludovick was only a bit of summer flirtation—natural enough too, for he's very good-looking and good-natured, and quite as clever as you want a man to be, for you don't want them to be *too sharp*—well, you'd save yourself a great deal of trouble if you'd drop it at once. When men get an idea into their head, they hold on to it; and they never see a joke, or take a hint, they're so frightfully serious; and in fact Ludovick is so completely *entêté* that I was afraid to suggest to him that

perhaps you had only been having a little fun. Only a *perhaps*, my dear; and after all I don't think that is your line; but you kept so very quiet about it that Ludovick considerably astonished me when he came to me with his full-blown confession. And I hope I did not hurt your feelings by anything I said on board the steamer when you were leaving Fort William. I thought you looked rather cut up; and I really did think Ludovick was treating you shabbily, after the attention he had paid you; so I thought I would restore your nerve by giving you a good, wholesome dose of worldly wisdom. Did I say anything that too fearfully shocked your sensitive soul? At all events, if I uttered a single word against that incomparable man-creature, Captain Ludovick, I hereby withdraw it, and make my humble apology on my two bended knees, and will never do so again.

"That's all. At present I prefer to keep a neutral attitude, in spite of Mr. Ludovick's fine speeches. I would advise you to consult Aunt Gilchrist before doing anything serious. At one time I know she entertained the idea that Ludovick was the scheming son of an impecunious old Highland laird, and that both of them were conspiring to improve their impoverished estate with her money; but perhaps that was a passing whim of Periphery. Anyway, you won't do anything without consulting her—if she's going to give you the money that ought to come to me, you cat!

"I suppose you were already revelling in dreams of future wealth when you went and tipped that horrid boy Johnny? Do you know what he did? His first exploit wasn't so bad; he merely got his photograph taken—for threepence; and when I said it was very like him, he chose to grin a very sarcastic grin, and say, 'Oh, they can mek anybody look pretty, them things!' giving me to understand that he was far above being vain of his

personal appearance. But with part of the rest of the money the fiend bought an old flint-pistol and now you are never safe for five minutes—there's a *bang* just close behind you, and you jump up to find that John has been firing at a cat for scratching up the garden, he says. But I know better. It's because he thinks they do him mischief when they turn to witches; and he wants to take them unawares when they are only cats. Master John has been so kind as to ask more than once about your health and general welfare.

"Now good-bye. I consider this *is* a letter; and that you're greatly indebted to me.

"Your affectionate cousin,

"FLORA.

"P.S.—Let me know; and don't forget about Aunt Gilchrist. Although you have robbed me, I don't bear you any ill-will."

Alison read this long epistle twice through, and with an ever-increasing gratitude, for she easily recognized the aim of it. It was all meant to give her courage. If she said yes, then she was to face the consequences with a stout heart, and with the assurance that difference of creed was not such a terrible thing after all; if she said no, then a summer flirtation was a thing to be easily forgotten, and nobody the worse. A good deal of the careless gaiety of the letter, Alison could see, was assumed for this very purpose of cheering her up in the difficult position in which she found herself: otherwise she might have been a little surprised by its apparent lack of womanly sympathy. Yet she could hear Flora's voice in it all the way through; and it was an honest voice, frank and straightforward, and most well-intentioned and friendly. And perhaps she could not help envying her cousin her confidence and high spirits, and admiring them

too: light-heartedness of that kind was not a common thing in Kirk o' Shields.

But not for a moment did she hesitate about the answer she was to send to Ludovick Macdonell, though, to be sure, when she came to put it down on paper, it did not seem to be quite so conclusive as when she had argued it out in her own mind. There seemed something wanting. She grew to think that, if she wrote a hundred letters, she would never get him to understand the atmosphere in which she had been brought up, nor the opinions and sentiments of the people by whom she was surrounded. To him it did not seem to matter whether a human being was a Catholic or a Protestant; to them far smaller things, both as regards doctrine and practice, were of vital and transcendent importance, as affecting nothing less than their eternal salvation. Nay, she told him frankly that, although she might reason herself into his way of thinking, it could hardly be expected that she should have been brought up all her life to hear Roman Catholics described as dangerous enemies, and Jesuits, and persecutors, and the Roman Catholic Church denounced as the Mother of Iniquity and the arch-plotter against men's lives and liberties, without imbibing some kind of prejudice. The Roman Catholics in Kirk o' Shields were the Irish labourers in the iron-works, and they were a terror to the rest of the population. If a priest were seen in the streets, the children would leave the pavement to let him pass, and look after him with fear on their faces. The Roman Catholics were popularly believed to be capable of committing any crime, for all they had to do was to go and purchase absolution; and were supposed to be secretly looking forward to the overthrow of the Protestant Church and the revival of heretic-burning. Foxe's "Book of Martyrs" was in every other cottage, side by side with the Bible; and the imagination of

children, from their earliest years, was stirred by hideous pictures of the sufferers tied to the stake and writhing among flames, with a scowling priest looking on, and pressing a crucifix on the sight of the dying man. And even if she could effectually clear her mind of the results of all this training, she would have to remember that her immediate relations and friends regarded Roman Catholics with an aversion and mistrust which they might possibly find it difficult to explain; while, as for the bulk of her father's congregation, they would regard her as having done something worse than merely imperil her own soul, as having betrayed a high trust, and brought disgrace on a family long renowned for its piety and its devoted constancy to the true faith.

This, or something like this, she hinted to him as clearly and yet as gently as she could; and then she read the letter over and over again, feeling more and more that it was useless, that he would not understand, that he would not accept it as a reason for her refusal. Nay, she began to imagine, as she brooded over these inadequate sentences, that if at this very moment she were in Lochaber, she would not be thinking in this fashion at all. What she had written seemed cold and narrow; seemed to be raking up an obsolete and despicable bigotry and intolerance; to have no honest concern with any human being's life. Oh, for one of those bright and clear and buoyant days, with a brisk wind ruffling the blue waters of the loch, with the sun hot on the garden-flowers, and on the gray beach with its yellow fringe of sea-weed, with Flora laughing, and Hugh listening amused, and Ludovick begging of them to hurry down to the boat: she would not be thinking this way at all! But here, amidst a gloom of smoke and rain, with the incessant mournful throb and murmur of the iron-works around her, and opposite her, visible through the streaming panes, the

sombre black walls and closed door of East Street Free Church, all the future seemed hopeless enough, and her heart was heavy, and she knew not how to say good-bye in a simple and natural way. For what was the use of considering these narrow prejudices, these ignorant bigotries, these contemptible aversions and suspicions, when all she had to say was good-bye? She tore up the paper, and went to the rain-beaten window and stood there, gazing blankly out into the wet street.

But this thing had to be done, and the sooner the better; so she resolutely went back to her desk again, and wrote as follows:—

"DEAR LUDOVICK,

"It cannot be. I think Flora will be able to tell you better than I can. I had written a long letter to you, but it seemed so heartless, and I don't want you to think me that. If you knew how I am situated, you would understand how this must be the last word, and I am sure, when I ask you, you will accept it as such. If we should ever meet again, I hope you will let me be always to you what I should like to consider myself now —your sister and friend.

"ALISON."

She cried a little; but when she had put the letter in an envelope and addressed it, and got the maid-servant, under shelter of an umbrella, to carry it to the post-office, her heart felt considerably lighter. It was over and done with now; she had to face the future as best she might; and in time she hoped this episode in her life would come to be regarded only as a kind of pleasant fancy, something to be remembered with a certain wistful tenderness, perhaps, but without any too serious pang.

Meanwhile she set about her busy and multifarious

duties, as house-mistress, as member of the Dorcas Society, as Sunday-school teacher, and all the rest of it, with a cheerful assiduity, convinced that this was the surest way towards forgetfulness. That was all she wanted now. Of her own accord she had locked the door of the Beautiful Land and thrown away the key. Here were her true interests and cares—superintending her father's household, taking her share of the charitable work that was going, and making herself agreeable to the members of the congregation. She tried to think the best of them, and of their narrow views and rather mean and envious dispositions. They were what nature and circumstances had made them, she strove to remember. Their wretched, spiteful little tittle-tattle, especially directed against any one who was in any way prominent or prosperous, was perhaps but a pathetic confession of inferiority, or perhaps, on the other hand, it served as a check upon vainglory and pretence. One thing she always could and did respect about them, and that was the earnestness and sincerity of their faith. There was no make-believe about that. If they were rather inclined to dwell on the fact that the rest of the human race were on the broad road to perdition, that was merely what they had been taught. And if their temperaments were sombre and melancholy even to moroseness, what else could be expected as the result of their stern repression of all human affections, of their rigid renunciation of all natural enjoyment, of that routine of monotonous and grimy toil, of sordid cares and anxieties, amid surroundings plague-stricken of smoke and ashes and gloom?

Sometimes, when the two sisters had a quiet evening to themselves, Alison would sit and discourse of all the wonderful things she had seen during her stay in the north, and of the kindness of the people there; and

Agnes had a vivid imagination, and could easily construct pictures out of what she heard. She had only seen her cousins Flora and Hugh on one occasion, and then they rather overawed this shy little lass, for they talked (as she imagined) beautiful English, and they had fine clothes, and a freedom of manner with which she was quite unaccustomed. They remained strangers to her—creatures belonging to a different sphere; but she could well understand how her sister Alison, who was so capable and clever in all ways, and used to be treated with respect, could go among them, and not only hold her own, but be welcomed as an equal and friend. But of all the people that Agnes heard of, the one she was most interested in was Captain Macdonell; and indeed she heard a great deal about him, for Alison was schooling herself in this direction, and was making believe to herself that she could talk about him without any heart-tremor whatsoever. To Agnes the young Highland laird seemed the very heart and soul of all this wonderful life that her sister was describing—to be the central figure in all these imaginative pictures; and she was naturally curious about him.

"Was he so very handsome, Ailie?" she said thoughtfully, on one occasion.

"Handsome!" said Alison, but with her face suddenly mantling red. "What has handsomeness to do with it? You would never think of his being handsome if you were with him; you would think of his happy disposition, and of his being able to do anything that was wanted, and of the way he seems to make the people round him pleased and light-hearted."

"Yes," said Agnes (apparently still contemplating her imaginary hero), "that is ever so much better, isn't it, Ailie—to have a nice disposition than to be good-looking? Of course I thought he was good-looking; I don't

know why; but now I can fancy him all you say, and quite plain as well—— "

"But I never said he was plain, Agnes," Alison said, with her face burning redder than ever. "No, not *plain*. I only said it wasn't his good looks you would think of first, or make the most of; but if it came to that—well, I —I think he is the handsomest and manliest-looking man I ever saw."

"Is he? Is he really?" Agnes exclaimed, with her eyes wide. "Oh, I think that's far pleasanter to think about! And I was sure he was handsome, somehow; tell me exactly what he is like, Ailie!"

But this Alison, who was greatly embarrassed, managed to evade; and in order to escape from her invidious position she wandered off into a description of the general appearance of the young Highlanders she had met, especially of the manner in which they turned out their feet in walking, giving them a certain proud step and air. But Agnes was still thinking.

"Is he going to marry Flora?" she asked.

Alison started somewhat; but instantly she recollected that that had been her own natural deduction from the intimacy she had found existing between Ludovick Macdonell and the Munroes.

"I don't know," she answered absently; "perhaps he may some day."

During these confidences Alison scrupulously avoided all mention of what had happened between herself and Captain Macdonell. That was all over and done with, she argued; it was as nothing now; it had only to be forgotten. Besides, she knew that Agnes would be inexpressibly shocked at the prospect of her sister marrying a Roman Catholic, and what was the use of alarming her, now that the possibility no longer existed? In all these recitals of her adventures in the north, Ludovick

figured merely as the light-hearted companion, the master-spirit of their expeditions, the ever considerate brother and friend. Agnes sat and listened with a vivid fancy that magnified and glorified. She heard of the wonders of the dawn flaming along the crests of the mountains of Lochiel and Ardgour; she could see the bright-coloured garden, the white road, the shore, the calm loch, and Hugh's sailing-boat lying at her moorings; she went fishing with them on those magical twilit evenings, while the northern glow hung high in the heavens far into the night; she went climbing with them up the sterile altitudes of Ben Nevis, with all the land below in darkness, and Hugh and Flora singing—

"The stars are all burning cheerily, cheerily,
Ho ro, Mairi dhu, turn to me!
The sea-mew is mourning drearily, drearily,
Ho ro, Mairi dhu, turn to me!"

She even transformed poor Johnny into a Scandinavian troll, possessed of supernatural gifts, and holding mysterious converse with the unseen powers. Aunt Gilchrist became a beneficent fairy godmother—for Alison had rather glossed over those little attacks of temper that were really the result of peripheral neuralgia. And one evening she said—

"Well, they seem to have been very kind to you, Ailie, and to have made much of you; and surely they cannot have forgotten you already. Have you not heard from any of them?"

"Oh yes, I had a letter from Flora," Alison answered; and then she honestly added, after a moment's hesitation, "and one from Captain Macdonell."

"I wish you had shown it to me," the younger sister said unsuspectingly. "It would be like hearing him speak; and you get to understand people better that way. Did you answer them?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Well, I hope you let them know you were sensible of their kindness to you. For I think you are sometimes too stiff, Ailie, and dignified—but perhaps that's only with some people."

"Not with them, anyway," Alison said promptly. "You couldn't be stiff with them."

So the days went by; and she strove to put her whole heart and mind into the duties and occupations immediately surrounding her; and she hoped that ere long she would be able to regard the time she had spent in Lochaber as a tale that had been told. Still, sometimes, and in spite of her strenuous endeavours at forgetfulness, she wondered that he had not sent the briefest line or word in acknowledgment of her letter. It needed no reply, certainly—nay, she had begged of him to accept it as the last word between them. He was only obeying her own injunctions in remaining silent. No doubt he knew, with herself, that that was best. Nevertheless, at odd moments, when some wandering fancy had gone straying back to the Highlands, she said to herself that surely he might have written just a line to say that her letter had been received. That would involve nothing. She wanted to know that he was not offended with her; that they were still friends. More than once she caught herself thinking too long about this matter, and growing sick at heart, so that tears would steal into her eyes when she was alone; and then she would get angry with herself, and dry her eyelashes with a proud impatience, and set to work more resolutely than ever at all those things that were expected of the Minister's daughter. Her sister did not even suspect.

One morning Alison happened to be alone in the house, save for the maid-servant Katie; and she was in her own room, busy with some dress-making performance. She

heard the bell ring below, but paid little heed, for there were a good many callers at the Minister's house, and Katie would simply have to tell the visitor that Mr. Blair was not at home. Presently, however, the buxom, black-eyed lass appeared, and informed her young mistress that a gentleman wished to see her. Even then Alison was not surprised, for it was a common thing for members of the congregation to leave messages with her.

"Who is it?" she said carelessly.

Katie looked round about her on the floor.

"He gied me a caird, miss, but I maun hae left it below."

"Oh, never mind," Alison said; and with much composure she went downstairs and opened the parlour door.

And then she stood transfixed, the colour suddenly forsaking her face, her fingers tightly grasping the door-handle. For the stranger was no other than Ludovick Macdonell—Ludovick Macdonell, with very visible satisfaction and kindness shining in his eyes; and betraying no kind of hesitation or embarrassment whatever on finding himself in Kirk o' Shields, and in the Minister's parlour, with Alison confronting him and almost shrinking back from his frankly out-stretched hand.

CHAPTER XI.

A VISITOR.

"ALISON!" he said in a tone of remonstrance, and he went boldly forward and seized the hand that quite unconsciously she seemed inclined to withhold from him. For whither had fled all her clear reasoning about Catholicism, and her conviction that she at least was free from the common prejudices amid which she had been brought up? His sudden appearance had startled her into her other self. She only knew—in a kind of rapid bewilderment—that here was a dangerous person come into her father's house; that she might be accused of harbouring an enemy; that she had concealed from her people the fact that this Ludovick Macdonell, with whom she had been on more than friendly terms, was a Roman Catholic; and that, unless he could be got away instantly, a terrible discovery would ensue. The young man looked at her with surprise, and even with a sort of good-humoured reproach: what could he, with his happy-go-lucky assurance, know of these vague and wild alarms?

"Alison," he said, "you don't seem very glad to see me. I suppose I should have written to tell you I was coming. Of course you knew why I did not answer your letter; I saw that writing was of no use; I thought it better to wait until I could see yourself; and so here I am. But I hope I haven't put you about——"

"Oh no, Captain Macdonell—no——" she stammered.

He dropped her hand in wonderment.

"Captain Macdonell!" he exclaimed. "It was 'Ludovick' in your letter——"

"Yes," she said, rather breathlessly. "Yes—I—I was writing hurriedly—and—it was like saying good-bye—and perhaps I did not notice."

(And all the while her heart, that was beating quickly enough, was longing to cry aloud to him, "Oh, if we two were only in Lochaber, I could speak to you there; but here I cannot speak to you; here there are people who would shudder to think that a Roman Catholic had made his way into the Minister's house, and was talking alone with the Minister's daughter: if only we two were in Lochaber, it would be all different then!")

"Alison!" said he, "aren't you going to ask me to sit down?"

This somewhat recalled her to her senses.

"I beg your pardon," she said, with the colour mantling in her face; and she shut the door behind her, and went forward to the window, where there chanced to be two chairs conveniently placed. "But it was such a surprise to find you here——"

"Oh yes," he said, in a very kindly fashion (for he was not one to take offence readily). "And of course I should have written. Or I should have waited till the afternoon; but the fact is as soon as I got into the town I was so anxious to make sure you were here that I came along at once. And you needn't be afraid, Alison; I'm not going to plague you. I only wanted to see yourself, to tell you that I went to Flora, as you asked me, and she explained to me your probable reasons for saying no. But, Alison, they weren't reasons at all! If other people delight in fighting over sectarian differences, and in making their theological squabbles so many little gods to be worshipped, what has that got to do with you and me? Here I am; there you are; why should there be inter-

posed between us this impalpable stuff that doesn't concern us? If you yourself were a bigot, I could understand it; but you are not; and why should you let the bigotry of other people interfere between you and me? Of course," he said, altering his tone and speaking with much less confidence, "you will see what I am assuming. I am assuming that this is your only reason for saying no. Tell me, Alison—tell me honestly—supposing I were a member of your church, you might then be persuaded to say yes?"

Her eyes were downcast.

"My people would have no objections against you then," she said, in rather a low voice.

"But that is not it," he urged, though quite gently. "You yourself—what would you say?"

Her voice was lower still.

"What is the use of speaking of it?" was all she said—but it was the tell-tale colour in her face that was for him sufficient answer.

He rose and took her hand, and held it for a moment; there was a proud and kind look in his eyes.

"I'm not going to press you further, Alison. I know enough now. You have told me quite enough; and now you must leave me to conquer all these tremendous difficulties that you seem to think so formidable. And first of all," he continued, in a very cheerful fashion, "I'm coming along this afternoon to show your father and your sister that I'm not a desperate man-eating ogre; that's what I've got to do."

Now she had gradually grown accustomed to the sound of his voice; and his very presence seemed to have lent her something of his own happy self-confidence; but this abrupt proposal recalled her first alarms, and she looked up startled.

"Oh yes," said he—and she could not help admiring

the robust unconscious audacity he exhibited, even while she looked forward to this contemplated interview with a good deal of dismay—"that is the best plan, to show yourself and give people an opportunity of judging what you are. The housemaid told me your father would be in about four o'clock. I asked for him first—no, don't be frightened!—not to say anything serious—only to say that I knew relatives of his in the Highlands, and that I had met you there, and that I wanted to make his acquaintance, as I happened to be in the neighbourhood. Will your sister be in then too?"

"Oh yes," said Alison, though she was still rather aghast. "Agnes will be back for dinner at two o'clock, and will be in all the afternoon."

"So much the better," said the young man, who seemed very well content after having received that assurance from Alison's downcast face. "I want your sister to be on my side; and I think I shall be able to manage that. But how I am to get at the whole congregation—how I am to win over the elders' wives—I don't quite see at present; and Flora seemed to fancy you would consider their opinion as of some importance. I shouldn't have thought so myself; but still, perhaps you know best. Well, good-bye just now, Alison; you have made me very happy, though you have not said much; and I'm not going to torment you into saying more; I'm well content to wait."

So presently he was gone; and she was once more alone, and entirely confused and disconcerted by this bold and unexpected intrusion. She could not understand it at all as yet. Mechanically she began to put things straight about the little parlour—wondering if he had paid any attention to these small matters; and she was mortified to think that she had that very morning postponed putting up clean curtains until the following

day. Then she went to the mirror over the mantelpiece, and rather anxiously smoothed her hair—as if that were of any use now. Moreover, her mind was all in a turmoil about his forthcoming visit in the afternoon: as to how Agnes would regard him; as to how her father would receive him; what he might think of the family as a whole. These were the immediate things that concerned her: as for his arguments, if arguments they could be called, she paid little heed to them. He had not in the least upset her conviction that it was all over between them: she understood what he could not be brought to understand; and there was an end to that. But she thought of Oyre, and of the old laird there, and of his great kindness and courtesy and gentleness to her, a stranger; and she hoped that Ludovick would bear away with him no unpleasant impression of her family and of her friends if he should happen to meet any of them. And then she remembered having seen in a certain shop-window a very neat small collar—an upstanding collar, blue-striped, such as those Flora was used to wear; and she thought she would quickly slip out and purchase that little bit of adornment before Agnes should be home for dinner.

But this town of Kirk o' Shields seemed now to be full of all kinds of sudden surprises and bewilderments. She had not put on her bonnet and left the house over a couple of minutes when she found herself once more confronted by Captain Ludovick, who was coming sauntering along the pavement, staring about him as if he were owner of the whole place. And while his eyes lighted up with pleasure at sight of her, it was with the greatest coolness that he inquired whither she was going, and proceeded to walk with her in that direction. To be going along the main street of Kirk o' Shields, with Ludovick Macdonell by her side—this was a strange

thing; and she hoped she was giving coherent answers to his many questions, for she felt that the eyes of all the neighbours were upon her; and she was profoundly grateful to him for affecting to take a friendly interest in this small town. She did not understand that his friendly interest, his more than friendly interest, was due to the fact that this was her birthplace; that he was regarding these squalid pavements only to think that now and again she had to trip along them; and that it was the influence of Alison's own eyes that caused his eyes to see something very fine and picturesque in the white masses of steam intertwisting themselves among the darker clouds of smoke. She was forlornly saying to herself that she had never seen Kirk o' Shields look so squalid and grimy; while he, on the other hand, was declaring that there was a distinct glimmering of sunlight that would soon break through the murky skies. And when they came to a certain large frontage—a large frontage it seemed among these small two-storied houses of dirty gray—she was quite ashamed. This had been a theatre—the only effort at gaiety ever made in Kirk o' Shields; and now the windows were all broken and battered in, and the dismal walls were plastered over with rain-beaten and bedraggled placards, and the words of the Royal License over the doorway were no longer to be made out by mortal eyes.

"Poor devils!" said Macdonell, contemplating this sorry sight, "the last lot who had to forsake that place must have had a bad time of it; for a provincial company will hold on so long as there's a single penny coming into the treasury."

"Please don't say anything about it to my father," Alison hinted rather anxiously. "They are rather proud of having shut up the theatre."

"Oh, you may trust me!" he said confidently. "You

may trust me. You've no idea of the amount of discretion I have."

"Perhaps not," Alison said, and she ventured to look up with a bit of a smile, "for I haven't seen much of it, have I?"

And behold! at this moment who should come along the street but the Rev. James Cowan, who, as he drew near, stared and better stared at this stranger, even in summoning up courage to raise his cap to Alison. Ludovick bestowed upon the young probationer but the briefest glance.

"Who's that?" he said to his companion, when the pallid-faced young man in the loose black clothes had passed.

"He is a young friend of ours," Alison made answer, and she appeared a little embarrassed. "A young minister—but he has not got a church yet."

"His trousers would make a dog laugh," Macdonell said indifferently, and as if that were the only comment that was necessary.

And not only did Captain Ludovick walk all the way to the shop with her, but he remained outside until she had finished her purchases, and proceeded to accompany her home again. It did not seem to occur to him that the neighbours might be wondering who was this unknown young man walking with the Minister's daughter. Indeed he paid but little heed to any one whom they chanced to meet; and although he did catch another glimpse of the Rev. James Cowan—who was furtively watching them from a distant corner—he made no comment about either him or his trousers this time, but went on talking to Alison. She could not get him to walk quick. He appeared to like this leisurely strolling along the gray pavement, with Alison by his side. And when at length he left her at the Minister's house, and the door was shut,

he turned away in a lingering sort of fashion, as if his occupation were gone, and he knew not now what to do.

But she had plenty to do and to think over about his coming back in the afternoon. A hundred times would she rather have had him stay away; but how could she hint any such thing, after the kindness and hospitality she had received in the Highlands? No; all she could do now was to make everything as tidy as possible about the little parlour; and when Agnes came home she got her help in putting up smart lace curtains—Agnes, meanwhile, being filled with wonderment over the unheralded appearance of this stranger from the far country she had heard so much about. Again and again Alison strove to tell her sister that Ludovick Macdonell was a Roman Catholic, but invariably her heart failed her; she was extremely anxious, she did not ask herself why, that Agnes should think well of him; and there was no time to combat prejudices now.

As it chanced, when the Minister returned home he was accompanied by Mr. Todd, the Precentor; and when they had laid aside their hats and entered the parlour, they resumed the subject that had been occupying them as they walked along. The Precentor was a little, elderly, gray-whiskered man, who spoke in a soft and suave fashion, as if he was carefully guarding his voice for his musical duties on the Sabbath; and his manner was of a studied humility, as if he was well aware that pride of office was inconsistent with the character of a Christian. It appeared that a number of the younger members of the congregation had signed and forwarded to him a memorial, begging him to introduce into his repertory a few of the more modern tunes, of a somewhat lighter cast than the old-established *Bangor*, *York*, *Ballerma*, and the like; and the Precentor could not presume to settle this serious question by himself; he would rather have the Minister's advice.

"For maself, Mr. Blair," he was saying (as Alison sat and listened intently for the door-bell), "I consider it quite naitural that the younger folk should like a pleasant and lightsome tune like *New Lydia* or *Devizes*, even if they could hardly expeck me to go the length o' *Desert* or *Violet Grove;* for mony o' them practise psalm-tunes at home, and they're better employed that way than in singing idle, or worse than idle, things that come frae theatres and sic places. But then, on the other hand, there's the older folk that have been accustomed a' their lives to *Martyrdom* and *Coleshill* and *Dundee;* they're sair put about by what they ca' fal-de-rals; and there's more than one o' them would say that tunes like *Merksworth* or *Walmer*, where there is pairt-singing, are not respectful to the Psalms, in throwing bits of them this way and that, as they would say."

"Surely," answered the Minister, "the younger people must remember that we enter the Lord's house for the purposes of prayer and worship, and not to exercise any personal gift of voice; and surely those tunes are the best that all are familiar with, and that exclude none from singing to the praise of God in His own tabernacle."

"Yes, Mr. Blair, that's true enough," the Precentor said, scratching his head in his perplexity, "but I'm afraid they'll no think o' that when they hear that the Precentor o' the U. P. Kirk has been giving out such tunes as *Shrewsbury* and *Cornhill*. I would not like to dictate; I hope I am a person of reasonable judgment and moderation——"

Alison listened no more. The bell rang. She could hear the housemaid go along the lobby; then there were other footsteps; presently the parlour door opened; and here was Ludovick Macdonell, hat in hand. The Minister rose.

"Father," said Alison, rather breathlessly, "this is Cap-

tain Macdonell, who is a friend of the Munroes in Fort William—and of Aunt Gilchrist too—and—and——"

"And I thought, as I was passing through Kirk o' Shields," said this young man, with the easiest assurance in the world, "I might as well call and see how Miss Blair was, so that I might tell her friends in the north. She made a good many while she was there."

The Minister received this unexpected guest with a grave courtesy, and bade Alison see that tea was brought in. At first the conversation was of a vague and general kind—about the war rumours, of which the newspapers happened then to be full; and the young Highlander had plenty of information to impart; for he seemed to have travelled all over Europe, and besides, he had a sort of semi-professional interest in the question. The little Precentor remained mute; *Bangor* and *Coleshill* were lost in the discussion of these wide affairs; while Agnes sat all unconsciously staring at Alison's hero, and not without some little secret elation of heart. For surely he was fit to be a hero, this young person said to herself, so good-looking and gallant as he was; and he talked to her father in a gay and frank fashion that somewhat astonished her; and Alison had never told her that he had so pleasant a smile. And he was going to marry Flora? No wonder Alison had talked a great deal about him—so handsome he looked, so winning and gentle was his manner. She would listen with a far keener interest now (if that was possible) to Alison's stories of her experiences and adventures in the far northern land.

Meanwhile tea had been brought in, and the Precentor had taken advantage of this break to resume his discussion of the merits of the various psalm-tunes, and of the advisability of his listening to the prayer of his humble petitioners. Macdonell listened for a few minutes, and then he turned to Agnes, who sat next him, and began

talking about music generally, and asking her whether there were any concerts in Kirk o' Shields, and so forth.

"I was up at Fort Augustus this autumn," said he in a casual way, "at the performances given by the school-boys at the Benedictine Abbey, just before they left for the holidays; and the way they presented a little comic opera—I forget the name—was really admirable. For an amateur performance, it was as clever a thing as ever I saw done."

Alison quaked to hear these dreadful sounds. The Benedictine Abbey! This was a specimen of his discretion, then? But fortunately the Precentor was engaging the Minister's sole attention at this moment; while as for Agnes, her heart was so well inclined towards this young man that suspicion of his true character never entered her head.

Indeed for Alison this visit was a severely trying ordeal; and despite all her remembrances of Highland hospitality and kindness, she could not help wishing that the young man was well out of the house. She knew not but that at any moment the disclosure that she dreaded might be made; and she could imagine her father's look of astonishment, and perhaps some other kind of look directed to herself; she could foresee her sister's sudden disappointment and reproach; she knew that the Precentor would have a wonderful story to spread about among the members of the congregation. As for Ludovick Macdonell, he appeared to be quite at his ease. When the Minister, returning to his stranger guest, began to speak of the position of the Free Church in the Highlands, and its representative pastors there, and their doings, Macdonell smilingly observed—

"Yes, sir, I believe the 'Highland host' is a formidable contingent when you have any delinquent to punish."

The Minister raised his heavy eyebrows for a second, for the "Highland host" is generally so described by scoffers and frivolous persons; but he merely went on to say, in his grave and deliberate manner—

"They have done us good service, and that at a time when a tenacious clinging to the truth, and a constant battling for it, is of the first moment. For what do we find all around us—a disposition to slacken the bonds of belief; a tendency to soften and break down those demarcations which our forefathers established, and which are now our only safeguard against an indifferentism that is but the first step on the steep road to infidelity. Oh yes, I hear the talk that is going on! 'It is time to forget old conflicts,' they say. High time indeed it is to forget old conflicts, if we are willing to forget why they were fought, and who fought them, and the stronghold they gave us as a possession for ourselves and our children and our children's children. Yes, I hear what they say!" he continued with a deepening scorn. "Let brotherly love continue—between the wolf and the lamb! All things are ready for it. England is leaning towards synodical church government; Scotland has hankerings for a liturgical worship; and the beginning is surely simple enough—merely a junction between the Presbyterians and the Episcopalians, or rather not a junction but an absorption, for how could we deprive the poor craytures of their ordinance of confirmation and their other rites and ceremonies? Has not the movement begun? Have we not got here and there in our own Presbyterian churches organs and floral services; and why should we not go on to the crucifixes, and high mass, and mummeries of processions?"

"Bless us a', do they say that!" exclaimed Mr. Todd, in a soft, awe-struck voice.

"But the fusion, as they call it, is not yet," the Minister

resumed. "There are some of us who still remember that there was such a thing as the Solemn League and Covenant. There are still a few of us who are not to be deluded by Episcopalian Gallios into surrendering one jot or tittle of our protest against the debased and idolatrous practices of the Church of Rome."

"Father," said Alison, in helpless haste, and with her forehead blushing pitifully, "Aunt Gilchrist said that—that she might perhaps come through to Kirk o' Shields this winter; she will be quite surprised to hear that Captain Macdonell has been to see us."

Feeble as this interposition seemed to be, it proved effectual; for Captain Ludovick, noticing her embarrassment, quickly came to her relief, and began to say some very nice and good-humoured things about Aunt Gilchrist and her ways—to all of which the Minister listened in silence, his face having resumed its ordinary expression of profound and resigned melancholy. And then as the Precentor, after a few final observations about *Comfort*, *French*, and *Artaxerxes*, rose to go, the other guest had no good excuse for remaining, and both proceeded to take their leave. Macdonell said pleasantly enough that he was very glad to have had the chance of making the Minister's acquaintance, and hoped to see them all again, should he revisit Kirk o' Shields. There was an abundant kindness in his look as he bade good-bye to Agnes; and then Alison, following the custom of most small Scotch households, herself escorted her guests to the outer door, which Ludovick Macdonell opened. Having allowed the Precentor to go on a step or two, he paused for a second as he took her hand, and then he said, regarding her upturned face—

"I want to see you again, Alison, for a minute, before I go back home. You are not terrified now, are you? You see no one has eaten me alive. Well, good-bye for

the present—mind, I shall be looking out for you." And with that he was gone.

So he had not left for good, after all, she asked herself, when she found an opportunity for a little half-frightened self-communion. He was still in this very town, under this dull canopy of a sky; perhaps only a street or two off; perhaps wandering about the bit of a hill on which stands the Established Church; perhaps down at the canal wharves, regarding the grimy work going on there. And he was still bent upon seeing her again—looking forward to some casual meeting, which might easily be construed into a clandestine meeting, should any one happen to pass by. She assured herself that she would not go forth from the house until she knew that he had finally quitted the town; and yet she could not keep herself from thinking of all the various thoroughfares and districts, and wondering in which of them he might be, and how Kirk o' Shields was looking in his eyes. Had he not even attempted to praise the picturesqueness of these wreathing clouds of steam and smoke? He was well-disposed towards the place, she thought. And she was glad that he seemed to have taken no manner of offence at what her father had said about the Church of Rome.

All the rest of that day she did not go out at all; and half the following night she passed in wondering whether she dared venture forth the next morning. Next morning came; dark and lowering it was, with the mighty forges flashing their orange flames into the heavy rain-empurpled skies; and she began to think it would be cowardly of her to remain within-doors. Why should she keep him hanging about this dull place on so dismal a morning, if he was bent on seeing her? Finally, having disposed of her household duties, she put on her bonnet and ulster (for the weather was getting cold now), and having fixed in her mind certain errands

which might serve as an excuse, if need were, she left the house.

Now, there were two ways of getting down to the centre of Kirk o' Shields—one by the main street of the town, the other by a less frequented thoroughfare that overlooked a branch of the canal and also the wide extent of plain on which the iron-works stood. She chose the latter, thinking it quite probable he might be strolling about there, watching the barges coming and going far below him, or waiting to see the molten metal of the furnaces run out like crimson serpents into the grooves of the sand-beds. But there was nobody at all in this silent and deserted thoroughfare; and she was thinking she might just as well return to the main street of the town, when she found herself overtaken. Without turning she knew who this was; she was not surprised when she heard her name; she stopped and welcomed him with a kind look and with hardly any embarrassment. Even in that brief glance, however, she could see that his face was much graver than usual.

"Alison," he said, "I have been thinking over all that Flora told me, and I believe I understand your position a little better now, and all the difficulties that surround you. Well, there is but the one way out of it: come away from among these people altogether!"

She shook her head rather sadly.

"I could not do that."

"Why not?"

"There are duties one can't throw over merely to please one's self," she said. "But even if I were willing to leave my own family and the people among whom I have lived, it isn't my going away merely that would hurt and shock them. I suppose it is a common thing for a young woman to have to leave her own people. But this is different. You don't know what is expected of a Minister's

daughter. Ever since you have been here I have been in terror lest any one should find out you were a Catholic: I dared not even tell my own father or sister."

"I guessed as much," said he, rather grimly, "from one or two expressions your father used; and my own inclination was to tell them there and then and brave it out, only I thought it might worry you, and so I let the thing drop. However, I don't see that it matters much whether they know that I am a Catholic or not. I don't want to convert them; I suppose they would consider it hopeless to try and convert me. But that's neither here nor there. My being a Catholic doesn't concern them: it concerns you and me only——"

"Ludovick," she said, and she turned her honest, clear eyes towards him with an appeal which he could not withstand, "let this be the end! Perhaps I have said more than I meant to say. But you cannot understand how I am situated. And—and you won't press me any further—don't make it too hard for me to say good-bye——"

Tears sprang to her eyes.

"Of course," she said, still regarding him with that look of appeal, "we shall be friends—always, always, always!"

"Alison," said he slowly, "you mean this—that I am to say no more?"

She nodded her head.

"Very well," said he, after a moment's hesitation; "my mouth is shut. But we shall be friends, as you say, always. And you want me to say good-bye, here and now?"

"Yes—yes," she murmured.

"Very well. Good-bye, and God bless you, my darling," he said; and then, before she knew what was happening, he had stooped and kissed her, pressed her hand once more, and she was left in this solitary thoroughfare—

regarding that retreating figure through a blinding mist of tears, and with a heart that yearned and yearned to call him back again, in spite of all her strength of will. Then she too turned away; and slowly got back to her father's house; and shut herself up in her own room, concealing herself from the light of day, and hiding what she deemed her unmaidenly grief. For it was all over now; and these bitter and passionate tears and this aching sickness of heart were but a merited punishment meted out to her for having listened to idle promptings and dreamed idle dreams.

Then, in the very midst of this utter prostration of misery she bethought her of the hour at which the next train would pass through Kirk o' Shields for Stirling, Callander, and the north; and it seemed to her that she might steal along to the station, with some despairing notion, not of speaking to him again, but of being able, herself unseen, to wish him a last farewell. So she hurriedly arose, and removed as well as she could the traces of her tears; then she quickly walked along the deserted thoroughfare she had left but half an hour before, and managed to reach the railway-line just as the train was about to start. Stealthily as a ghost, and white-faced, she passed underneath the tunnel, up a wooden staircase, and on to the platform—but so concealing herself that no one in the train could see her. Alas! what was the need of concealment? He was not looking out for her; he had no thought of her being there; these strangers about were all indifferent to her. The great black engine, throwing up clouds of steam that were a bewildering white against the lowering heavens, began to draw away from the station; more and more rapidly it went, dwindling and dwindling the while, until it disappeared altogether; and before her there was nothing but the empty track of black ashes, and the shining lines

of rail that went away out narrowing and narrowing until they were lost in the haze that seemed to fill this dismal and hopeless day. She stood there, absent-eyed and heavy of heart—perhaps with wistful visions before her of the fairer and happier scenes whither he was bound: then the Minister's daughter, still pale-faced and somewhat worn and tired in look, but with a touch of resolution about her lips, walked with firm enough step through the dull streets of Kirk o' Shields, back to her father's house. She was grave and silent, that was all, as she set about her ordinary duties; not even her sister had any suspicion of what had happened.

CHAPTER XII.

INTERVENTION.

A LONG and dreary winter followed; and the slow weeks and months seemed to plunge Kirk o' Shields into an ever-increasing gloom. Sometimes the land lay hard and silent in the grip of a black frost; and then there was no breath of wind to stir the atmosphere; the fumes and vapours hung heavy in the motionless air, so that people forgot what the sky was like. Sometimes a bewilderment of snow was abroad; and then through the pervading mist the far uplands could be seen to be of a phantom white; but in the town itself and all round about it the snow was immediately dusted over with coal, where it was not trodden into mire. And then again would come persistent rain; but here there was some little compensation; for if the daytime showed the very extreme of wretchedness and squalor, the night made the flames of the great furnaces more resplendent than ever, as the crimson glow flashed across the wet slates of the roofs. Altogether a miserable winter it was, numbing the mental faculties and cramping the bodily powers; but the members of East Street congregation abated not one jot or tittle of their strict observances; no matter how hard or wet the weather, every Sabbath morning found them slowly and decorously taking their places in the cold, damp-smelling pews; while the attendance at the Weekly Prayer-meetings, the Bible Classes, the Young Men's Christian Association, and so forth, was undiminished.

During all this time Alison's anxieties and duties were considerably increased by the fact that her sister Agnes, never very strong, seemed to grow more and more liable to attacks of nervous weakness or excitability; and as these frequently culminated in sleep-walking, Alison had to be on the alert by night as well as by day. It was so strange to be in this little room that seemed filled with the sombre glow of the iron-works, and to watch the timidly uplifted appealing hand, and to hear the murmured "Mother!" which told how far away the spirit was from its frail tenement of a body. Agnes Blair, at all events, had one way of escape from the desolation that overshadowed Kirk o' Shields. Night brought her release, and carried her away to far and shining regions, where she met the gentle-visaged mother who was waiting for her with out-stretched hands. Alison could see her slip noiselessly from the bed, her large gray eyes entranced and still; and for a moment she would remain uncertain, as if it took that space of time to waft her across the black night to the mystic splendour of a perpetual dawn —to the great wall of jasper and the radiant gates of the new Jerusalem. Then she would whisper, "Mother!"; her gentle guide was found; these two were walking now through the wonderful streets in the city that had "no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it; for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof;" and the rapt eyes were gazing on the tree of life, and on the river of the water of life, clear as crystal, that came flowing from the great white throne. And then sometimes (in this little room, in the silence, with Alison half afraid to follow her lest she should rouse her too suddenly) the younger sister would raise her hand slightly, and stand transfixed, as if she were intently listening. Listening to what?—to the distant singing of the ransomed hosts, or to the voice of the angel pro-

claiming aloud the doom of Babylon the Great? These were sleepless nights for Alison, though her sister in her unconscious state was amenable enough; and next morning Agnes had no knowledge of these restless wanderings, save as a wistful dream.

Perhaps the elder sister was not altogether sorry to have the whole burden of the domestic duties, and of the charitable labour expected from the Minister's family, devolve upon her own shoulders; for there were many things she wished to forget, and she found that resolute hard work was the best means towards that end. Not that she could entirely banish bygone occurrences from her mind; for now and again there came a letter from her cousin in Fort William, which was sure to contain some news of Ludovick Macdonell, even when it did not enclose, as frequently happened, some written communication from himself, addressed to Flora. He was in Egypt now, and on his way to India, where he vaguely hinted that there was some chance of his getting an appointment; but in the mean time the winter society in Cairo seemed extremely pleasant, and he was in no hurry to leave.

"But look here, my dear Miss Dimity," Flora wrote, in enclosing one of these epistles, "I don't quite understand why, in the midst of such gaiety, and with all those nice people being kind to him, he should be sighing and pining for his native land. If he wants to come home, what's to hinder? And there's such a lot to pine for at this present moment! You should see Fort William now, Miss Dimity—dead—dead as a door-nail; all the rowing-boats high and dry in the back-yards; all the yachts gone; and the sea-birds find the place so entirely to their mind that you can hear oyster-catchers whistling all along the shore, and see skarts sailing about and bobbing their heads within a stone's-throw of the house. There's no

bustle *now* at the quay when the *Mountaineer* comes in; and what's the use of making yourself very smart and nice, and going down to meet her, when there's never a man on board younger than the captain, or perhaps a commercial traveller bound for Inverness? We're all asleep here; the weather is perfectly clear and still; the hills and the loch are as much in a dream as we are; and when the fiend John, no matter how far away he is, fires his pistol at some harmless bird on the shore, you would think the whole world was listening. By-the-way, if Ludovick is discontented amid his southern gaieties, why doesn't he come home for the winter shooting, which is very good about Oyre? Hugh was to have come through from Edinburgh; and I should like to see the boy again, notwithstanding that he hates the whole of us poor women creatures. I don't understand why Ludovick should stop in Egypt or in India either, if he would rather be at home.

"But what is far more extraordinary is that he should take such pains to write to me so minutely about himself and his doings. I was never so honoured before, I assure you. Really, this sudden friendship is very flattering; and I begin to think I am not quite so contemptible a being as Hugh would make me out, even if I can't throw a stone straight. And, indeed, I don't know that I am not betraying confidence in letting you see these letters; but then, on the other hand, I have sent him such news of you as I could, for let me tell you, my dear Miss Dimity, you are a pretty poor correspondent. I *did* think you might have told me a little more about the breaking off of that affair between you and Ludovick—for it was precious little I could get out of *him;* but I suppose in such a very delicate matter it is wise for outsiders to remain outsiders; and I have no doubt that what you did was for the best. But I can't help being a little sorry

sometimes; for, to speak honestly, he is a *real good fellow*, and I am sure he was very fond of you; and it would have been very nice for us to have had you as a neighbour at Oyre. However, it's no use talking now."

It was no use talking now; that was all gone and done with; indeed, the matrimonial project that at the moment was before Alison's mind, or rather pressed in upon her attention, was of a very different cast. The Rev. James Cowan was now openly and avowedly a suitor for her hand, though, to be sure, his mother did most of the wooing for him. But that astute little woman had come to see that nothing was to be hoped for from this poor lad of hers accompanying his parents to the Minister's house, and sitting in hopeless apathy until they were ready to come away again. It was in vain that the fond mother praised the logic of James's sermons, and repeated sayings of his, which were mostly of her own invention, and tried to draw him into conversation with the Minister, so long as the listless-eyed, down-spirited, pale-faced probationer had never a word for Alison, and, indeed, covertly and quickly avoided her when there was a chance of meeting her in the streets of Kirk o' Shields. So at last Mrs. Cowan bethought her of a means of spurring him on.

"Ye see, James," said she, with a fine affectation of frankness, "your father and me have never liked looking forward to your leaving Corbieslaw; and you are the only son now; and we had been thinking that even if ye married, while as yet ye hadna a church, ye might bring your wife to the farm, and she might just help to cast an eye o'er things that will be her ain by-and-by. But maybe that's short-sighted. Ye'll be going away from Corbieslaw, James, sooner or later, when ye get a call; and I've been considering that it might be better for ye in many ways to make the change now. If ye

were to marry Alison Blair, and go to Edinburgh, and take a bit house there for yourselves, ye would be mair among folk, and have a better chance of getting a congregation; and I'm sure that Mrs. Gilchrist, wi' a' that distillery money, would see that her niece was well provided for. We'll do our pairt; and though I'm sweirt to break into the store o' napery at Corbieslaw, still there's enough and to spare for the quiet way ye would be beginning; and surely it would be ill done o' Mrs. Gilchrist, after a' the fuss she has made about Alison Blair, if she did not do something real handsome. That would be a chance for ye, James; ye ought to see folk; better for ye to be in Edinburgh, ready to step into any vacant pulpit that offers, than writing sermons at Corbieslaw."

She had hit the nail on the head this time. The possibility of having a house of his own—of escaping from the brutal tyranny and contempt of his ghoul-faced father—awoke a world of new ideas and half-piteous hopes in the breast of the luckless probationer; and as it seemed that Alison Blair was to be the means of his deliverance, he turned to her with a sort of mute and wistful appeal. He did not speak. But he patiently walked home from church every Sabbath day with Alison and her sister; and the congregation soon began to make comments—the elders being of opinion that if this lad married the Minister's daughter, Alexander Cowan of Corbieslaw would be more domineering in the church than ever, their wives hinting that Mrs. Cowan was a shrewd and a sharp woman, who had an eye on the money that every one knew was coming to Alison.

Indeed, in time it came to be regarded as a settled affair; and Mrs. Cowan was not the one to contradict any such pleasant rumour. In fact, she herself went to the Minister to demand his approval. Now, in Kirk o' Shields, as has already been said, not only was all outward ex-

pression of the natural affections severely checked, but it was considered almost unseemly to mention them. The word "love" was never used at all, except in a pious sense. When Mrs. Cowan went to the Minister to tell her story, and to gain his consent, he was exceedingly embarrassed and even resentful at being approached on such a subject. He had no thought of inquiring how the young people were disposed towards each other; still less would it have entered his mind to go to his daughter and ask for any confidence. He dismissed Mrs. Cowan as quickly as he could; and she went away well content; for she could easily twist about the one or two half-impatient phrases he had used so as to convince Alison that her father was looking forward to seeing her become James Cowan's wife.

And as for Alison herself? Well, if the young probationer had come forthwith and abruptly asked her to marry him, she would probably, with a touch of her father's impatience, have told him not to make a fool of himself, and so made an end of that matter. But there was something pathetic in the spectacle of this poor lad, frightened-eyed and cowed of manner, mutely sitting in the corner of the room, or humbly endeavouring, perhaps, to say a word or two to the Minister when some professional subject was brought forward. He sent Alison one of his manuscript sermons, which was a harmless kind of gift. Out of mere curiosity she read it. It really was a most business-like production; carefully divided and arranged; and if there was not much of the burning fire of rhetoric in it, at least it was clear and sensible and simple in style. The text was I. Corinthians, ii. 14: "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned;" and the main argument was that the mystery of godliness was

beyond the reach of reason, and that human knowledge, while efficient within its own sphere, was wholly inefficient, and not to be regarded, when it attempted to deal with the higher things of faith. She thought it was exceedingly well constructed; and, being of a kindly disposition, she said so to the young man, whose pallid face flushed up between embarrassment and pleasure, for he was not accustomed to appreciation. But when Mrs. Cowan heard of this approval, and proudly came to Alison, and asked her what she thought of James's future now—plainly intimating that Alison herself was concerned—the girl grew somewhat grave and reserved. It is true that it had been conveyed to her that her father would be well pleased if she married the young minister; and she could understand that the congregation generally would approve of such a step; but at all events, the time was not yet; and her brows gathered together a little when she found the farmer's wife taking the whole thing for granted.

But the most startling event that occurred this winter—or rather the early spring it was now—was a sudden and unexpected visit from Aunt Gilchrist, who descended like a blast from the mountains into this dull level of dreariness. The tempestuous small dame had quarrelled with one of her fellow-patients at the Crieff Hydropathic Establishment; had instantly resolved to leave and bestow her patronage on the rival resort in the island of Bute; and as she had to pass through Kirk o' Shields on the way, she wrote that she would arrive there on the following afternoon, and would stay the night. Alison read this letter with a quick joy at her heart. Here was some one associated with that happy and beautiful time she had spent in the Highlands; here was some one to whom she could talk about those kind friends in the north. And on the morning on which she got this note, Kirk o' Shields was looking almost cheerful. A cold north-west wind had

been blowing overnight, and some of the smoke was cleared away; so that there was a faint semblance of sunlight on the gray pavements; and the spire of the Established Church, on the top of the little hill, rose into clouds that here and there grew thin and showed a wan suggestion of blue. But by the time it was necessary for Alison to go along to the station, the afternoon of the short day was closing over; and the smoke-clouds seemed to gather together again; so that Kirk o' Shields presented its usual appearance—with its crimson fires and white blasts of steam leaping and twisting and writhing into the desolation of the now darkening heavens.

"And here's my bit lady!" Aunt Gilchrist called aloud, the moment she stepped on to the platform; and the bright-eyed, fresh-complexioned, silver-haired little dame caught Alison by the shoulders, and kissed her again and again. "Well, well, it's just a delight to see you; for I've been a lone, lone woman, Alison, my dear, since I went to the Hydropathic; and many's the time I've wished ye were with me, just to stand up for me, and teach them no to trample on a poor old creature like me. And I've booked all my luggage through to Glasgow, Alison; so that I've nothing but this bit bag here; and we'll get into a cab at once——"

"A cab, Aunt Gilchrist!" said Alison, in dismay. "Do you really want a cab? For there isn't such a thing in Kirk o' Shields."

"Bless my soul and body, what kind of a town is this!" the old dame exclaimed; but she was in far too good a humour over seeing her niece to be seriously put about. "And where's the gas? Do they no see it's dark? Or is this the only kind o' daylight they've got in this dreadfu' place——"

"If you would rather not walk, aunt," Alison said doubtfully, "I could send for a machine——"

"Away wi' your machines!" Aunt Gilchrist cried. "We'll just set out on foot—it'll serve to keep Periphery in proper subjection. And ye'll carry my bag for me, Alison, and let me lean on your arm; for you're a strong young lass, for all your delicate complexion; and many's the time I wished ye were at Crieff to fight my battles for me. Ye would have taught them something, I'm thinking!—for ye've a sharp tongue in your head when ye like—oh ay——"

"I should not have thought you wanted any help in that way, aunt," her niece said demurely, as they left the station.

"Now, Alison Blair, don't be impertinent to an old woman like me," Aunt Gilchrist made answer, with great severity, "the very moment I set eyes on ye! Who else would have come to see ye in such a fearsome hole as this—mercy on me, it's like the bottomless pit! Surely it's worse since I was here last—how many years was that? It's enough to frighten a body—ye'd think ye'd got into the bad place by some kind o' accident, and without a chance o' getting out again. Does any human creature ever come here that can avoid it?"

"Oh, we don't mind it, Aunt Gilchrist; we're used to it," Alison said cheerfully. "And this morning the town was looking quite pleasant; we could actually see the sun shining—or something like it. But I think it was getting your letter, aunt, that made the morning seem so bright and nice."

"Ay, ye're there again, are ye, with your palavering tongue!" the old dame protested; but all the same, she clung a little closer to the warm young arm that gave her such help as she wanted; and in this wise, and without any great quarrelling, they by-and-by reached the Minister's house.

"How are ye, Minister, how are ye?" said Aunt Gil-

christ gaily, as she entered the parlour with outstretched hand.

"I am fairly well in health," the Minister made answer, in his slow and serious fashion. "But the years are passing over us, Jane; it is time we should be preparing ourselves for the long journey."

"I'm no come to that yet," said Aunt Gilchrist briskly. "I'm going to Rothesay. Rothesay's a grand place in cold weather like this; the sea-air is as soft as soft; and there are no crowds o' tourist-bodies swarming about in the spring. Alison, my dear, I would like a cup of tea."

"Yes, indeed, aunt, you shall have that at once," her niece said promptly; "and then in a little while you must have something more substantial; for one of the elders is coming in this evening, with his wife and son—I would rather have had you all to ourselves, but this is a long-standing engagement—and we shall all have a proper tea together."

"An elder?" said Aunt Gilchrist, with a bit of a sniff. "I hope the body is not going to preach at me."

Indeed, her attitude towards the whole Cowan family, when they arrived, was soon seen to be distinctly hostile; but her special antagonism seemed to be aroused by the thick-lipped, wide-nostrilled, heavy-headed farmer, whose ponderous assumption of importance seemed to irritate this alert little person beyond all endurance. As for Mrs. Cowan of Corbieslaw, no sooner did she discover who this unknown visitor was than instantly she set to work to propitiate Aunt Gilchrist by every description of servile fawning and flattery. The small, shrewd eyes expressed an eager approval of everything that Mrs. Gilchrist said; it was Mrs. Gilchrist alone who was listened to—and listened to with humbly appreciative smiles and nods. Poor James was nowhere. The presence of this stranger annihilated him. But sometimes he looked at Alison—

perhaps wistfully thinking of his chances of escape to Edinburgh.

Now, when the evening meal was over, Aunt Gilchrist was naturally looking forward to a pleasant little chat about friends and acquaintances, or about affairs of the day—notably a murder-trial that was then exciting much interest; but this frivolous waste of time in nowise commended itself to Mr. Cowan of Corbieslaw. By sheer weight of words he bore down all opposition until there was nothing heard but an interminable monologue on church government, to which the Minister listened with a kind of abstracted air, only putting in a correcting word now and again. Aunt Gilchrist began to fret and fume. Once or twice she turned to Alison with a look of amazement, apparently asking if this was the kind of evening she usually passed. And still the elder laboured on with his somnolent and confused incoherences about synods and presbyteries, until the brisk little dame abruptly addressed her niece.

"I'm thinking this is pretty dry work," said she contemptuously. "It makes me wish the Doctor was here—and the decanter."

Alison smiled.

"I've provided that for you, aunt," said she, and forthwith—to the wonderment and consternation of the Corbieslaw family—she deliberately went to the sideboard and brought out an old-fashioned decanter of cut crystal, which was filled with some dark ruby fluid. Then she produced a wine-glass, and a tumbler, and some sugar, and some cinnamon, while Agnes was sent to fetch boiling water.

"There, now," said Aunt Gilchrist, with her bright-coloured face beaming with satisfaction (and the elder had been startled into a momentary silence), "that's like my bit lady—everything straight, and honest, and above-

board; no tricks, and hiding, and make-believe. I don't like the hole-and-corner business at the Hydropathics; but then, to be sure, it's hard to go to bed on a cold winter's night without a drop o' something to comfort ye——"

"It's quite true, Mrs. Gilchrist," said Mrs. Cowan, in her suavest manner, "yes, it's quite true."

"It would be better," said the farmer, scowling at his wife, "if ye would remember that that drop o' something is just the curse of this country."

"Ah, do ye say that now?" remarked Aunt Gilchrist, as she coolly began to prepare her negus, Alison helping her the while. "Well, I'm no the country, and it never cursed me."

"I'm sure of that, Mrs. Gilchrist," said the farmer's wife, in her politest Edinburgh accent. "Everybody can see that. I'm sure ye take nothing but what is good for ye."

The scowl on the farmer's face grew darker as he heard his wife thus shamelessly go over to the enemy; but he held his peace; perhaps in his dull brain there was some glimmering guess at the reason for her extraordinary complacency. Meanwhile the determined little wine-bibber at the table had begun to sip her negus with much satisfaction—never dreaming of the notable discovery she was shortly to make.

"Well, Minister," said she, "I'm thinking I would just like to take Alison away with me to Rothesay for a week or two. I'm sure the poor thing wants a breath of fresh air after being so long in this dreadfu' town. A town?—it's not like a town at all; it's like a pandemonium. I should think ye would have little difficulty in describing to your congregation the terrors of the place of punishment—ye've but to bid them look around them. And I would like to take her away for a week or two, just to

cheer her up; for they're no so bad, they Hydropathics, after a'; they have their bits o' diversions—a dance now and again, and the like——"

"Dancing!" exclaimed the big elder in solemn tones. "I should not like to hear o' a minister's daughter taking to dancing. We ken what comes o' dancing. We ken what happened in the time of Herod the tetrarch——"

"Herod the tea-tray!" said the impatient little dame with open scorn. "Do ye imagine that a young Scotch lass cannot dance a Highland Schottische without wanting somebody's head served up in a charger?"

"Jane," said the Minister severely, "I think your mention of scriptural things might be a little more re[illegible]tful and becoming."

"Well, indeed, Mrs. Gilchrist," the farmer's wife interposed, to make all things smooth and pleasant, "there may not be so much harm in dancing as people say. No, not *quite* so much as they say. I hardly approve of it myself any more than Alexander does; but maybe there's not *quite* so much harm in it. Besides, the younger people have newer ideas, so to speak, and I'm not sure that James would set his face altogether against dancing—dancing in moderation, that is—in reasonable sobriety and moderation."

Aunt Gilchrist directed a swift glance towards James; but the abashed probationer instantly lowered his eyes.

"I would like to take Agnes too," she resumed, turning again to the Minister, "but I'm afraid ye cannot spare them both; if ye can, I'll just be too glad."

"It's a kind offer, Jane," the Minister made answer, "and I'm sure the girls are obliged to you; but Agnes is hardly well enough to go anywhere at present, and as for Alison, I doubt if she could leave her various duties, outside the house as well as in, with a clear conscience. She was a long time with you last summer."

"If I may speak," observed Mrs. Cowan, with an engaging humility, "if I may speak, I would say this, Mrs. Gilchrist, that it would be a useful experience for us all, but especially for Miss Agnes, if ye were to take Miss Blair away wi' ye for the time ye propose; for then we should a' have to learn how to do without her. And perhaps ye may have heard," the farmer's wife continued, with a significant little simper, "that we are expecting some such change?"

"What's that?" said Aunt Gilchrist sharply; and she glanced with a sudden surprise from Mrs. Cowan to Alison, and back again, and even at the white-faced young probationer, who had furtively looked up.

"Oh, well," said Mrs. Cowan, not to over-emphasize the hint—for she could see that Alison was grievously confused—"a young lady naturally looks forward to changing her name sooner or later, and it's just as well that her friends and her family should have learned to bear the loss—for I'm sure you'll agree with me, Mrs. Gilchrist, that it will be a great loss to them in the case of Miss Blair."

This plausible explanation in nowise quieted Aunt Gilchrist's suspicions; and the first thing she did as soon as the Cowans were gone was to go to her own room and summon Alison thither.

"Alison," said she, "what did that simpering idiot o' a woman mean? Is there a talk of your getting married?"

"I believe there is, aunt," the girl answered.

"To whom, then?" demanded Aunt Gilchrist, with an ominous frown.

"Well," said Alison, after a moment's hesitation, "to —to the young man who was here to-night—young Mr. Cowan."

"What!" exclaimed the little dame, taking a step backward in order the better to stare at her niece. "What!

To that creature! To that wizened wisp of a thing! To that voiceless, washed-out rag of a stickit minister? Alison Blair, have ye taken leave of your senses?"

"Well, they all seem to expect it—that's all I know about it," Alison said petulantly; for it was hard for her to be reproached for what was none of her doing or wishing.

"But you yourself—what do you say?" was the next sharp question.

"I haven't been asked," she answered, with her petulance darkening into sullenness.

"Now, Alison, don't make me angry!" her aunt exclaimed. "Don't you quarrel with me. Are you going to marry that insignificant creature out of spite—is that it? Oh, mind you, I've seen that done often enough. I've seen girls marrying out of spite, and precious sick and sorry they were afterwards. Your family and your friends won't let you marry the man you want, and so you revenge yourself on them by marrying a man you hate or care nothing about. Is that what ye're after?"

"No, it is not!" said Alison, with proud lips, but with tears near coming to her eyes. "It is not, and you've no right to say any such thing."

"Oh, very well, very well!" said Aunt Gilchrist, still regarding her niece doubtfully. "But what about that young Macdonell? Answer me that now, Alison, for I've heard something from Flora."

"Captain Macdonell and I are the best friends in the world, and we mean to remain so, and I don't care who knows it," the girl answered, with the same proud expression of face, though her head was partly turned away.

Aunt Gilchrist looked at her for several seconds in silence.

"Ye're a queer creature, Alison; and I'm not sure that I've quite made ye out yet. But I'm not going to quarrel

with ye, for all your stiff-neckedness and pride and wilfulness. I'll talk to ye in the morning. I'm not going to let you make a fool o' yourself, if I can help it. Oh, I know what you wilful young hussies are capable o' doing when people thwart you; and here you've been nursing schemes and plans, and not a word to me, not a word, though I thought I had some right to be consulted. Oh yes, yes, yes," she continued, as if some new light were breaking in upon her. "I see now why that cringing, crimping, smirking creature o' a woman was a' bows and becks and smiles. My certes, here's a pretty clan-jamfrey of a project to be building up in the dark! Oh yes, to be sure, Mrs. Gilchrist was always in the right; and there mightn't be *quite* so much harm in dancing; and Miss Blair *ought* to go away to the Hydropathic, that we might try how we could bear her loss; while that great big yellow-faced, sow-snouted lump of a man sat and stared at my wee drop o' negus as if he thought Satan was likely to make a sudden appearance on the table. But never you mind, Alison, my dear. They havena carried off my bit lady yet! No, they have not; and maybe they'll just find out that they've to settle wi' me first. So just give me a kiss, my dear, and say good night."

Alison's face had considerably lightened at these kinder tones, and she would have bid her aunt good night as she desired; but as the Minister's daughter she was bound to remember the rules of the house.

"Are you not going down again, aunt?" she asked. "Father will expect you at family worship, and I hear the servants just going in."

"You pretty Miss Innocence!" this audacious little woman exclaimed, with a wicked laugh—and she pushed the girl to the open door, and kissed her affectionately by way of saying good night. "Don't you see that that's the very reason why I'm going to bed?"

CHAPTER XIII.

A SUMMONS.

AUNT GILCHRIST came and went; the young spring days began to lengthen—even in this sombre Kirk o' Shields; and Alison, with a calm serenity of mind that she mistook for forgetfulness, busied herself from hour to hour with her various tasks, and strove to earn, or to continue, the good-will of all these diverse folk—many of them intractable enough, some meanly suspicious of her advances, others "dour" to a degree—who made up her father's congregation. But especially was she kind and considerate towards James Cowan; for the poor pale-faced probationer, whatever his pathetic fancies may have been, did not bother her much; while his mother, despite her insinuating smiles and hints addressed to Alison, failed to drive the disheartened lad into any more resolute attitude. Alison was grateful to him for his silence; and she read the two or three sermons he timidly submitted to her; and comforted him with the assurance that they would be very useful to him when he received the long-looked-for call.

But this tranquil life was about to be disturbed. Summer-time found Aunt Gilchrist again at Fort William; and nothing would do the imperious small dame but that Alison should repair thither at once. Periphery, she wrote, had been almost entirely subjugated and driven forth—though sometimes it returned and feebly tried to regain possession; she was going to make up for all the

crippled time; Alison was to come and share in her wild diversions; and no longer need the bit lady fear being buffeted about by any fitful gusts of temper. Agnes, she was glad to hear, appeared to be quite strong again; very well, let her take a turn at managing the Minister's house; the elder sister deserved a holiday; besides, Aunt Gilchrist demanded that she should come, and there was to be no argument, but immediate obedience.

When Alison received this summons her heart fell to beating with a marvellous rapidity; and she was somewhat breathless and bewildered; and also not a little resentful against herself that so simple a proposal should so entirely upset her peace of mind. For she had come to consider all that had happened in the previous summer as a sort of dream, to be regarded with a touch of tenderness, perhaps, until it should finally fade away and be forgotten. But this possibility of reawakening associations, of seeing actual places that had become almost visionary to her, and of meeting, not the vague phantoms that dwelt in her solitary reveries, but the living people themselves, was altogether a startling thing. Instinctively she shrank back from it. And then again she began to argue with herself. What had she to dread? The days of cruel anxiety, of bitter farewells, of hidden heartache, were all over now. She had schooled herself into acquiescence. And why should she be afraid to meet Ludovick Macdonell? He and she had promised to be fast friends: and what was the friendship worth if she was not prepared to abide by it? Probably by this time he had half forgotten her. In his numerous letters from Egypt and from India he had hardly ever mentioned her. If she went to Fort William she would merely find that she had one acquaintance the more—that is, if he happened to be in Lochaber at all.

Indeed, when the Minister's consent had been obtained

and her brief preparations made, and when she was ready to set forth upon her northward journey, she had almost convinced herself that she could meet Captain Ludovick without any too serious qualm, and that in returning to Lochaber she was not risking the reawakening of any too poignant regrets. It is true that as she entered the little station a sudden throb went through her heart; for she could not but remember the terrible day on which she had come up hither—a pale, trembling ghost of a creature—to see the black train thunder away into the mist. The mere sight of those long, empty lines of rail seemed to make her shiver. But that was a long time ago now; and here was Agnes, very officious with her last little kindnesses; and joyful anticipation, not the recalling of bygone anguish, was the natural mood for a traveller about to enter upon a long and pleasant holiday.

Moreover, this was a singularly clear and cheerful morning that was greeting her setting out, when once she had got entirely away from the dark and poisoned region surrounding Kirk o' Shields. She saw the sky again—a wonderful thing, far-reaching, with soft white clouds in it that hardly stirred. The air was sweet that came in at the carriage-window. And the farther and farther northward that she got, the more and more beautiful became her surroundings. The sun lay warm on the wide meadows through which the Forth winds its silver way; the gray battlements of Stirling Castle rose far into the blue. The rugged chasm of the Pass of Leny was hanging in rich summer foliage; a thousand million diamonds flashed on the rippling waters of Loch Lubnaig. And then she got away up into wilder regions—into the solitudes of Glen Ogle and Glen Dochart: but the mountains had nothing forbidding about them on this beautiful morning—there was a velvet softness in the shadows even where a towering peak grew dark under a passing cloud, while for the

most part the lower slopes and shoulders were dappled yellow with sunlight. And then again, as she was nearing Tyndrum, she grew still more curiously interested in these outward things; and her heart, in a sort of laughing mood, began to amuse itself with a wild impossibility. For it was at Tyndrum station that Captain Ludovick had made his appearance—having come down through the Black Mount forest to intercept her on her southward journey; and might he not be here to meet her now? She assured herself that she would welcome him gladly, even joyously; there would be no embarrassment at all; she would call him "Ludovick," and take his hand, and know that he had not forgotten her. She could not understand how the thought of meeting him had alarmed her. Here she had no fear. In a few minutes she would look out of the carriage-window; she would call to him "Ludovick!—Ludovick!" she could see the flash of recognition in his eyes, his quick step forward, and his opening the carriage-door. Sister-like, she would be as kind to him as she could; and they would go through the remaining stages of the journey in great comfort and happiness; and he would tell her all about Hugh and Flora and the rest of them—while Loch Awe and gray Kilchurn went by, and the Pass of Brander, and the hills of Benderloch, until a sweep of Loch Etive should bring them in sight of Morven and Mull, and the mountains that face the blue western seas.

But even as the train slowed into the little station she knew that all this was entirely impossible; and it was merely to indulge a whimsical fancy that she affected to look out for some one; and when the train had moved on again, and she had resumed her solitary seat, she could hardly say she was disappointed. For well she was aware why it was that Ludovick Macdonell had been so sparing of his references to herself in these letters from abroad;

and why he had scrupulously refrained from trying to reopen any communication with her. It was his quick sense of courtesy and of consideration towards her that restrained him. He would not weary her with his importunity. Everything should be as she wished. And when she told him that she was tied hand and foot by reasons and circumstances that she could not explain and that he could not understand, he was bound to believe her, and to take her no as meaning no. And well she knew that in accepting Aunt Gilchrist's invitation to go to the Highlands, she was not in danger of encountering any distressing persecution on his part.

At the same time, when she got to the end of her railway-journey, and found Hugh and Flora awaiting her, she was a little surprised, not perhaps to find that Captain Ludovick was not with them, but that they did not refer to his absence. They said nothing about him, in fact, even when they were comfortably settled on board the *Mountaineer*, and had plenty of time for rapid questions and answers. And then again, as the steamer moved away from Oban harbour, Alison was keenly interested in all the objects around her; for these seemed so strangely different from the memories of them with which she had beguiled the dark hours of the winter. Everything was so extraordinarily vivid. The air seemed full of light. To Hugh and Flora doubtless these were familiar features—the pretty little bay, all of a trembling blue, save where the sunlight blazed and shimmered on the ripples—Kerrara, with its slopes of green and points of weeded rocks—the long spur of Lismore ending in the small gray lighthouse—the far mountains of Mull and Morven, clear to the top, the clefts and scars on their vast brown shoulders traced in lines of the purest, most delicate azure—all this was familiar enough to them; but it was not at all familiar to her. The world seemed so

beautiful!—so surpassingly brilliant—and yet so peaceful and calm and still. It appeared to her that in leaving Kirk o' Shields she had come out of a long and sombre night, and got into the white day again; and that her eyes were naturally bewildered by the overpowering radiance around her. The phantom pictures of her winter dreams had fled: this was the living world, filled with sunlight, the wide skies all open, the wide seas all trembling in that lustrous blue, a gladness everywhere! They could not get her to go below for lunch. She would not go. So Hugh had to take Flora down, and see that she was provided for; but instantly he was up again, and sitting beside this pretty, pale-complexioned, gray-eyed cousin from the south. He lit a cigarette (a newly acquired habit for him) and did not talk much to her; for he could see that she was occupied—and more than content.

Flora came on deck again, and the general conversation was resumed—about Aunt Gilchrist's newly developed passion for the game of poker, about the last exploits of the boy John, about the big takes of bream they had been getting on recent evenings, and so forth; but never a word was said about Ludovick Macdonell. Yet here was Appin; and vividly enough, as the boat slowed into the pier, could Alison recall the broad-shouldered, slim-built young fellow, with the laughing eyes, and clear, sunburnt complexion, whom she had seen come down with his long swinging pace to the steamer. There was no Captain Ludovick at Appin pier now; perhaps he was not even in Lochaber; perhaps he had got that appointment, and had remained in India. And so the *Mountaineer* went on again, through the fair and shining day. Up here Loch Linnhe lay in a dead calm—long swathes of white and blue without a ripple anywhere; there was no stirring of wind; even the rugged and lonely hills of Kingairloch, that usually are dark and purple-stained, showed their

slopes of red granite and gray schist through a faint haze of summer heat, and were grown quite ethereal in hue. As the steamer cleft its way through the still water a school of porpoises took it into their heads to race her; and ever and anon a dorsal fin would appear on the calm surface, gleaming for an instant in the sunlight as the oily-looking fish rolled over. The very quietude of the scene around them seemed to moderate the garrulity of the cousins; Hugh lit another cigarette and began to walk up and down the deck; Flora leaned her two hands on the gunwale, and her chin on her hands, to look abroad over that shining breadth of sea; while Alison watched the slow passing by of the successive bays, the rocky shores, the upward-sloping plantations, the barer summits of the hills receding into the almost cloudless sky. There was but little talking; anyhow Ludovick Macdonell's name was not even mentioned.

And then at last they came in sight of the southern outskirts of Fort William—little white dots of houses among the trees, with pleasant green slopes rising behind them, and the vast bulk of Ben Nevis, seamed and scarred, towering far overhead. Those pretty little villas set among gardens had a smiling and cheerful appearance as they were brought closer and closer; and Alison jumped to her feet to respond, when she perceived that from certain windows a welcome was being waved to her. She knew the house well, and her heart warmed towards it. How often had she not sat and dreamed of it—in the drear winter nights of Kirk o' Shields, in the hushed parlour, with every soul in the house bent over a pious book—dreamed of it and of all the kindness and new wonderful experiences connected with it. As she waved her handkerchief to those unseen friends, her eyes were moist. Indeed they had been kind to her, in their robust, happy-go-lucky fashion.

And here, awaiting their arrival, was the lad John. But John was in an exceedingly bad temper. There had come down to the quay a band of itinerant musicians, who were going away by the steamer; and they had been utilizing their time of waiting by playing a series of loud and lively strains, which, instead of having any mollifying effect upon John, only irritated him, for he was bent on business. And not only that, but even as he was conveying Alison's things ashore, she following him, one of these musicians had the effrontery to come up cap in hand to the newly landed party, whereupon John interposed angrily.

"Oh, go aweh hom!" he said, with crushing scorn. "Go aweh hom! Your noise gives me a sore head. I would sooner hear a bull roaring than you and your noise!" And with that he seized the shafts of his barrow and manfully set forth—to display to the world the difference between a person who could do honest work and an idle, useless, strolling vagabond.

Aunt Gilchrist was seated in the front garden—amid a brave show of roses red and white, of pansies pale yellow and deep purple, of sweet-william of every shade, of nasturtiums, and pheasant's eyes, and double-poppies; and she herself was just as bright and pleasant to look at as any of them. Her welcome of her bit lady was of the warmest.

"Yes, my dear," said she, and she took the girl's hand in hers, and patted it affectionately, "this is something like the kind of place for you and me to be together. I tell you I'll never go to yon town again. I never will, Alison. You'll have to come to see me. Do ye remember that dreadfu' night—wi' yon great, big, jaundiced-faced baboon o' an elder maundering away about synods, and assemblies, and sederunts?—mercy o' me!"

"But no doubt it was interesting to him, aunt," said Alison, with a smile.

"Interesting! I'll not believe it. I'll not believe a word of it. It was done just for the pleasure of hearing his own continuous gabble and gabble, like a burst rain-pipe on a pouring day. What I should have done but for that comforting drop o' port-wine negus——"

"How is your neuralgia, aunt?" Alison asked.

The little old dame held up a warning finger.

"Whish! Alison," she said, in a whisper. "Periphery's lying quiet just now; we'll no waken him. I've a kind o' feeling in the left side o' my foot that I don't entirely like. I'm afraid Periphery's no quite driven out o' the house yet; he's lying asleep in the cellar, as ye may call it; but as long as he doesna get up and begin to stamp about, we'll just say nothing."

"And are you still taking your port-wine negus?" Alison asked.

"What's that got to do with it?" the old lady retorted, with some sharpness. "Are you setting up to be a doctor too? Are you going to begin to blether about bromides and iodides? I tell ye, ye may fill yourself wi' drugs from week's end to week's end, and ye may dance about from one Hydropathic to another from January to December; and Periphery 'll just laugh at you, and have as firm a grip o' ye as ever; but if ye can coax the bit chappie to lie quiet, by paying no heed to him at all, and doing nothing to stir him up, then ye've got a chance of getting something like peace and comfort."

"But I suppose you can walk well enough, aunt?" Alison proceeded to ask.

"H'm!" said Aunt Gilchrist doubtfully. "I can walk. Oh, yes, I can walk. But I cannot say that I am very eager about walking. It's a fine thing to let sleeping dogs lie."

And then again Aunt Gilchrist said—

"Well, I suppose ye've kept your word, my dear. I

never got that line ye promised to send me if they began to drive ye into marrying that poor, shambling, shauchly windlestrae o' a creature; so I supposed that smirking mother o' his was letting ye alone—— "

"But what's that, aunt?" Flora cried interposing. "Is Alison going to be married—and to somebody we don't know? Why didn't you say anything about it?" Then she turned to Alison with a curious look in her face. "Is it true, Alison? Are you going to be married?"

"Perhaps I'd better wait until I'm asked," Alison answered, with reasonable modesty.

"Come away, now," Aunt Gilchrist said, taking the girl's arm. "Come away into the house. That's a secret between you and me, Alison. When the time comes, I'll tell them all about the stickit Minister. Oh, ay, *when the time comes!*" She laughed quite gaily. "'Deed, that was a fine plot for me to discover; and if I hadna discovered it, I don't know what might not have happened; for you're just that wilful and perverse, you stiff-necked little Puritan! And you were very near quarrelling wi' me, too. Quarrelling wi' me!—I like your impudence!"

"Well, it isn't easy quarrelling with you, aunt," Alison said, "unless when Periphery has wakened up."

"Whish, I tell you, whish!" the old lady said, in a peremptory whisper; and then they all went into the house, where the Doctor's wife was waiting for them at the tea-table.

Now, Aunt Gilchrist was a considerate person; she knew that young people like to be by themselves at times; so presently she had ordered off the three cousins to find amusement for the afternoon, until the evening should summon them to supper and her favourite game of cards. At first there was a talk of getting sea-lines and going after the bream; but Flora interposed.

"Of course," said she, laughing, "Alison will go if you

ask her. But she'll just hate it all the time. She's always so neat and trim; and she can't bear getting her fingers and her cuffs wet——"

"What is far more horrid," Alison herself said, "is the flopping of the fish in the bottom of the boat—near your dress: they seem to come alive again when you least expect it——"

"Very well, let's get out the gig, Flora," was the brother's suggestion, which was instantly adopted. "We'll take Alison for a row; and she can steer. The oars are in the gig, so we can get off at once."

And thus it was that Alison speedily found herself in command of the long and shapely boat, with her two cousins leisurely pulling a slow and measured stroke, out into the glassy plain. The warm afternoon sunshine was now streaming along the loch, lighting up the bracken-covered knolls, the grassy slopes of the hills, and the green and yellow patches of the crofts along the shore; while the sea was so still that the shining spars of the yachts sent down reflections unbroken by any line or ripple. There was no particular designation before these voyagers. They went this way and that, exploring the various shores; the rowers rowing with idle but regular stroke; Alison seeming to drink in the joy and calm and beautiful colour all around her. Evening found them up at the mouth of Loch Eil; and now, while the western hills were darkening in shades of softest olive-green, the sea around them was a plain of burnished gold and pale rose-purple. A small boat crossing that golden plain was itself of jet-black, and as it went on its way it left behind it two long divergent lines of lilac, like the attenuated wings of an insect. When the cousins rested from their rowing, the silence around them was so intense that they could hear the sound of voices coming across from the Corpach shore. This was not like Kirk o' Shields!

On their way home to Fort William, Alison took Flora's oar, and Flora went to the tiller; and sometimes these two were chatting to each other; and sometimes they could hear Hugh humming the old Gaelic air that is known as "The Cowboy;" or perhaps Flora, in a pause of silence, would sing to herself, but with no great sadness, a verse of "The Lowlands o' Holland"—

"The love that I had chosen,
Was to my heart's content;
The saut sea will be frozen
Before that I repent;
Repent it will I never
Until the day I dee,
Though the Lowlands o' Holland
Hae twined my love and me."*

By the time they had leisurely got back to Fort William the evening was well on; but the darkness it had brought with it was confined to the massive bulk of the hills along the opposite shore; overhead there was a clear and luminous sky, with a few purple and orange-fringed clouds; while the loch around them had become of a trembling silver-gray, for a slight wind had arisen, and the glassy surface was gone.

And it was still in a beautiful lambent twilight that they had supper, and thereafter took to cards—in a room fronting the west. This was a very unscientific game of poker that Alison was now called upon to witness. Aunt Gilchrist's chief aim seemed to be to engage in a battle-royal with her brother the Doctor; and when these two combatants closed, the others having given up, the fun waxed fast and furious. For the Doctor knew but little of the game; and in his perplexity he invariably consulted his wife, who knew less, but was ever good-humouredly ready with her advice. These consultations, however, were innocently outspoken and above-board; so that

* *Twined*—severed.

Aunt Gilchrist could easily guess at what was in her opponent's hand; and again and again her shrill laugh of triumph rang out as she swept in the coppers from before the angry Doctor's nose. It was a very frank and honest game of poker that was played by these simple folk; and as the "ante" was one halfpenny, and the limit of betting threepence, there was no deadly destruction dealt to anybody.

It was during the progress of this happy-go-lucky game, however, that Alison incidentally made a notable discovery. Flora had adventured upon a bold piece of bluffing—a dangerous experiment for any one with such an expressive face, and such merry, conscious, tell-tale eyes; the Doctor, at the instigation of his wife, refused to be intimidated; the young lady was "called," and found to be queen high, and the pool was raked in.

"Ah, you thought you were playing with Ludovick, did you!" her brother said scornfully. "When she's playing against Ludovick she bluffs like the very mischief, for he always gives up. That's not the game at all! If he held four aces, he'd pretend he was afraid of her, and put in his cards. The other night it was quite ridiculous; I'm certain he was only pretending he held bad hands."

"Wait a little while, Hugh," his mother said, with a quiet smile. "You may find yourself just as willing as any other young man to lose at cards when you want to make yourself agreeable."

"What stuff all that is, unless the girl's a fool!" Master Hugh retorted. "To be flattered by being allowed to win at cards! Besides, it's spoiling the game for other people."

As fresh hands were being dealt, nothing further was said on the subject; but this brief conversation had revealed to Alison not only that Ludovick Macdonell was

in his own country, but that he had been in this very house a night or two before. And for a moment her surprise that he had not come to see her on her arrival was accompanied by a sudden fear that she had offended him somehow. It was but for a moment. Perhaps in Kirk o' Shields, sitting alone with her silent reveries, she might have alarmed herself with some such surmise, and tortured herself over it, and longed for some explanation. But here, among these simple, good-natured, well-contented folk, amid this babblement of laughter and harmless wrangling, she dismissed it forthwith. Ludovick was her friend: she need not mistrust him. He would tell her why it was he had not come to welcome her. Or rather, was not the reason sufficiently apparent? He did not want to embarrass her. It was consideration for her that kept him away—even as it was a kind of delicacy on the part of her cousins that bade them refrain from speaking of him to her. But he would make his appearance in good time, when there was no risk of embarrassment. All things were well. She felt herself very happy and safe in this little dining-room, among these kind folk. And Ludovick would be coming to see her one of these days; and she thought she would be able to give him a more frank and friendly greeting now. There was nothing to frighten her, here in Lochaber. Indeed, she would try to make up to him for any restraint of manner she might have shown in Kirk o' Shields. Amid the noise of this most unscientific game she sat and looked on; but she saw something more than the cards: she saw Ludovick Macdonell coming forward to meet her—it might be in this very room—it might be on the white roadway outside—but in his eyes there was the pleasant smile that she knew of old; and this time she would *not* withhold her hand.

And some such vision was still before her, long after

the noise of the poker-party had ceased, and long after the house had sunk into profound silence and slumber. She was now in her own room, seated at the window, breathing the soft cool air that floated up from the shore, and watching the mysterious pallid glow in the sky and on the wide water—that no-man's-land of twilight that in these regions lies between the lingering evening and the coming of the dawn. The hills on the other side of the loch had slowly wrapped themselves in impenetrable gloom—no single feature of rock or tree visible—the deep olive-green grown so dark as to be almost indistinguishable; but over them the heavens were of a clear and pearly gray, with one or two clouds, of softest purple, hanging motionless there; while the sleeping loch was of a wan and livid blue, with the various boats and yachts, lying on that still surface, appearing so strangely vivid that they seemed to have been carved out of jet. Not a leaf stirred in the garden; not a ripple whispered along the seaweed fringe of the beach. Far into the night she sat, half dreaming, but wholly satisfied and content; for she was in the enchanted land again; her heart was full of peace—as serene and full of peace as this wide, silent, beautiful world out there; and she had assured herself that all was well.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN EXPEDITION.

When Alison looked out next morning she observed the boy Johnny engaged in raking smooth the gravel-path; and she was pleased to see him thus industriously occupied; and hoped that he had abandoned the inveterate indolence which used to possess him. And it seemed hard that just at this moment three graceless loons, coming along from the town, should set to work to jeer at John. What offence, if any, he had given them, she could not make out—partly because her window was shut, and partly because the altercation, insulting on the one side, and scornful on the other, was carried on in Gaelic. It ended by the three of them making derisive gestures with their fingers, the further to exasperate Johnny; and then—the tallest of the lads having picked up a clod of earth and flung it at him by way of playful farewell—the idle vagabonds went on.

Johnny regarded his retreating foes with a gloomy deliberation. They did not wholly disappear. Alison could see them indulging in all kinds of horse-play farther along the road; then they went down to the edge of the loch and began to throw stones at a bit of floating weed. At the same moment she saw John put aside his rake and come back to the house; and as she judged that he had resolved to treat those tomfools with proper contempt, by paying no more heed to them, she turned to look at the beds of yellow pansies, and the masses of

orange nasturtiums, and the blue lobelia borders, which were all very bright and cheerful in the morning sunlight.

But presently Johnny reappeared; and she perceived that he had in his hand an old straw hat. This he left at the gate; and then—with a furtive look in the direction of his enemies—he stole across the road, went down the beach, picked up a large stone, and quickly returned. He then took that battered old straw hat, and placed it in the middle of the highway—but with the big stone carefully concealed inside. That done, he came back to the garden, shut the gate, and locked it, and took up a place of observation behind a couple of fuchsia-bushes, where he could see without easily being seen.

Johnny's dark and subtle anticipations proved correct—his enemies were not going far; very soon they were perceived to be returning along the road, with all kinds of gambolling and boisterous nonsense. But no sooner did they notice the old hat lying there than they simultaneously made a rush for it, struggling and hauling at each other as to which should have the first kick. By this time Johnny had thrown himself prone on his face, just behind the little parapet of stone supporting the railings which were the garden frontage, where also was a row of fuchsia-bushes. He could hear, but he could not see; neither could he be seen—except by Alison, who was a spectator of the whole performance. It was the tallest of the lads—he who had thrown the clod of earth at Johnny—who managed to shake off his two companions, and secure the coveted first kick. He came on with a rush; then there was a crack! but instead of the tattered hat flying into the air, behold! a big stone rolled away along the road, while the enraged and astonished youth caught up his leg with both hands, and clinched his teeth outside his underlip in a manner betokening extreme

dissatisfaction. Even through the shut window Alison could hear the roars of derision set up by his companions; and she could see that Johnny, lying snug behind the fuchsia-bushes, was entirely convulsed with fiendish laughter, rolling and shaking, and digging his elbows into the ground. The injured youth outside regarded the house and its surroundings with malevolent and vindictive eyes; but of course there was no one to be seen. He even limped painfully up to the gate and shook it; and it might have gone hard with Master John if he had been discovered; but the gate was locked. So there was nothing for that lamed and sobered young man but to hobble away back to Fort William—no doubt delighting his companions with his contortions of pain and his curses and vows of vengeance.

But there was harder work than gravel-raking in store for Master Johnny that day. The three cousins had planned an expedition to a little lake far away among the hills—Flora desirous of getting some water-lilies, and Hugh looking forward to an hour or two's fly-fishing; while upon Johnny devolved the double task of carrying the luncheon-basket and rowing the boat. Alison wanted Aunt Gilchrist to accompany them; but the wild escapades which the little dame had been promising herself were being postponed from day to day, through some uneasy suspicion that Periphery was merely asleep with one eye open. Aunt Gilchrist went with them as far as they could drive; then the waggonette set out for home again, carrying her with it; and the three cousins were left to climb the hill towards this solitary tarn, the faithful Johnny struggling manfully upward with the luncheon-basket on his shoulder.

The morning was singularly bright and breezy—indeed, Flora was much surer of getting her water-lilies than Hugh was of getting any fly-fishing, for the wind was

blowing hard and there was an abundant sunlight everywhere. When at last they came in sight of the little loch there was a picture before them that would have delighted the eye of anybody but an angler. Set in a cup of the hills this small tarn was surrounded by soft green slopes, some of them covered with birch and some with bracken; while along the shores ran a circle of tall rushes that were bending and swaying in successive waves; and then another belt of water-lilies, whose broad leaves were all lifting and flapping in the wind, while the big white stars of flowers moved slowly hither and thither. For there was a brisk gale blowing; and the water of the lake, naturally of a deep brown, was driven into a rich purple-blue, that became quite ruddy in the shallows. Everywhere there was a restless change and movement—a universal shimmering and rustling—the fierce gusts striking down on the marshy banks where the sand-brown grass, the tall loosestrife, and the meadow-sweet bent before the blast, and then widening out upon the racing and hurrying waves that dashed with a fringe of white along the leeward shore. It was all very bright and beautiful, no doubt—the keen blue sky overhead, the brilliant sunlight, the purple loch amid those fair green slopes; but there was not much prospect of fly-fishing.

In the mean time Johnny was despatched to the other end of the loch to bring across the boat; and a fine sight it was to see him trying to drive that heavy craft against wind and water. For a space it would seem as if he were making progress; then one of those black squalls would strike down, tearing the racing waves along with it; and Johnny would come to a sudden standstill, even when he was not carried to leeward.

"His laziness is having his work cut out for him this time!" Hugh said grimly, as he watched the spray springing white at the bows of the slow-labouring boat.

"Then why don't you call to him to put back, and you could go and help him?" Alison naturally asked.

"That would be no use—only one can pull in that boat," was the answer. "But a dose of hard work does Johnny a power of good. He thinks over it for days after; and that leaves him less time for plotting mischief."

Nevertheless, the lad John had a heavy pair of shoulders, and eventually he managed to bring the boat along to the broad bed of water-lilies, through which he had to force it by using one of the oars as a pole. When at last he had got the bow securely jammed into the soft bank, he stepped ashore.

"Well, Johnny, is there any wind out there?" Hugh asked of him, in playful fashion.

Johnny ruefully looked at the palms of his hands.

"If there wass mich more o' this," said he, "I think I would need to go to the smiddy, and ask them to mek me a pair of iron hands."

"Why, man, it's fine exercise for you!" his master said.

"I do not know about that," said John, regarding with a kind of sullen reproach the farther end of the loch and the lashing waves; "but I know this, that if you wass down yonder you would think the Duffle himself was in the water, and trying to drive the boat ashore."

Indeed, from the comparative calm that prevailed here among the rushes and lilies it was impossible for any one to judge of the force of wind and water farther out—as the three cousins were presently to discover. For as soon as Hugh had got his tackle ready they all embarked, and slowly pushed their way through the tangled mass of stems and broad leaves. This was all very well, and Hugh had even begun to cast, when it was found that the boat was beginning to drift down the loch with a marvellous rapidity. As they had neither an anchor nor a bit of rope, their only resource was to get Johnny to

pull against the wind; but perhaps Johnny's previous struggle had exhausted him; or perhaps he was beginning to think he had had enough of this useless labour: anyhow, the boat kept drifting over Hugh's flies, which he could only recover in a helpless manner.

"Pull harder, Johnny!" the impatient fisherman cried. "Don't let the boat drift so fast."

Thereupon John made a further pretence of pulling very hard indeed; but still the boat was careering down the wind, and getting momentarily into rougher water.

"How do you like this, John?" Alison inquired, with a gentle smile.

"I wish I wass in my bed sleeping," Johnny answered gloomily, as he laboured away at the cumbrous oars.

"Sleeping in the middle of the day?" she asked.

"Well, sleeping is better for you than rowing, at any time," he answered sullenly.

But perhaps this discontent of John's was in a measure affected—just as there was a good deal of pretence about his hard rowing—for presently he was heard to say—

"Cosh, I think this is the loch where the Duffle comes up to get a drink; and when he finds a boat on it, he's angry, and he shoves her about below. I would need a pair of iron shoulders as well as iron hands to pull a boat on this loch!"

Whatever the matter was, it was clear that Johnny could not hold his own against the gale; fishing was out of the question; and they had only now to consider where they could let themselves be driven ashore without getting wet with spray. Fortunately they espied a little bay that was partly sheltered by its abundance of rushes; and here the boat was run in out of the tempest, and securely fastened to the bank. Hugh took out his fly-book and began to go over the leaves in idle thought; the girls went away to gather an armful of meadowsweet for home

decoration; and John, sitting on the gunwale of the boat, morosely gazed out upon the loch that had given him such a dose of hard work, and all for nothing.

Presently Flora called aloud—

"Hugh, isn't that Ludovick away over yonder?"

They could make out the figure of some one crossing a distant bracken-covered ridge.

"Very likely," was the answer.

Flora turned to Alison with an air of studied indifference.

"I think it very likely too. He knew we were coming to this loch to-day. And somehow all our expeditions get mismanaged when Ludovick isn't with us. You'll see he'll be able to do something for us."

Alison heard, but did not answer; she was a little tremulous and breathless; she dared not raise her eyes. And yet this was not fear that filled her heart—not fear at all, but rather a kind of gladness and joyful anticipation. With all this brilliant, blowing day around her, with these pleasant companions, and with Ludovick himself coming in this casual fashion to see what they were after, there seemed no occasion for any hesitating doubts or fears. She was ready to welcome him; she hoped he would think her welcome of him friendly. And if she did not care to watch that solitary figure coming across the slopes of heather and bracken (for Flora was standing by), she seemed to know well enough that this was Captain Ludovick, and that presently the little party of four would be together again, just as in the olden, never-to-be-forgotten days.

"Yes, it's Ludovick: let's go back to the boat," Flora said; and back to the boat they went, to deposit their wild-flowers there, while the new-comer's long, swinging stride was bringing him rapidly towards them.

"How do you do, Miss Alison? I'm glad to see you

back again in Lochaber," he said, in a very pleasant and friendly way; but his eyes did not rest on her more than a second; he immediately turned to Hugh and Flora.

A chill of disappointment struck home to her heart. Was this the long-expected meeting, then? Was this his welcome of her—this couple of half-indifferent phrases, and hardly a single glance? He had given her no opportunity of showing that she wished to be kind to him—that she had no fear now—that she claimed the friendship he had promised. He was talking to Hugh; and Hugh was explaining that Johnny could not hold the boat against the wind, so that the fishing had scarcely been tried.

"Oh, as for that," Macdonell said promptly, "I'll pull the boat for you. I don't know that it will be of much use—the fish won't rise in squally weather like this. However, you may as well try it, now you're here; and if you put on a big fly we'll troll up the middle of the loch, and then you can put on your other flies again and we'll drift down the side."

"But, Ludovick," said Flora, "Alison and I may as well stop ashore, and there'll be less weight in the boat."

"Not at all!" he protested. "You come and see the fun—you never know what may happen. But Johnny can stop ashore."

"Johnny will not be sorry," said Miss Flora, with a pleasant smile.

"No, I will not be sorry," Johnny said, mostly to himself, in answer to her sarcasm—and he was morosely looking out on the dark and driven water. "It is no use trying the fishing. The Duffle is in that loch; and the fish are all aweh hom."

Despite this evil augury, the four companions got into the boat, and presently they were making their way through the rushes out into the open loch. And very

soon it appeared that this new gillie was of a much more powerful build than his predecessor—though he seemed to set about his self-imposed duties in a very free and easy manner. Notwithstanding that the waves were striking heavily at the bows, and that those black squalls came whirling along every minute or two, he managed to keep a fairly steady way on the boat, and apparently without much trouble to himself; and if they could not induce a fish to follow the trailing fly, at least they succeeded in getting up to the head of the loch, where the drifting was to begin. And in this drifting, too, it seemed quite easy for him to hold the boat just as he wished, so that Hugh industriously fished all down the one side of the loch—not casting, but merely lifting the flies so that the wind carried them out. But their conjoint labour was of no avail. The trout would not rise. The squalls and heavy water had frightened them, and they had gone below, or into the safety of the reeds. So there was nothing for it but to run the boat once more into that sheltered little bay—and to get forth the luncheon-basket.

Now, this ought to have been a very pleasant little luncheon-party, in this snug retreat; and Flora and Hugh were merry enough; but Alison could not help being a little surprised and hurt by the distant courtesy with which Captain Ludovick appeared to treat her. She felt that she was not on the same footing with him as were Flora and Hugh. All his laughing stories were told to them. He rarely addressed her, except when civility demanded; still more rarely did their eyes meet. Did he want to punish her, then, for her refusal? Or did this coldness arise from an excess of courtesy—from his determination that no revival of his former attentions should embarrass her? Anyhow, it seemed hard that she should be thus left out, in however indefinable a way.

In the afternoon, however, an incident occurred that

for a time at least interrupted these strained and formal relations. Having waited in vain for the wind to lessen, they thought they would give the loch one more trial before going home; and as before, Ludovick Macdonell offered his services as gillie. They had got up to the head of the loch, and were drifting down before the squally breeze, when Hugh, noticing that his flies had not fallen quite straight, unthinkingly twitched them out of the water to make an ordinary cast over his shoulder. To have done this successfully, with these heavy gusts blowing, would have demanded some little exercise of strength and also of dexterity; but, as it was, this careless backward cast did not get the line out at all—in fact, it was blown down in a heap upon the boat and its occupants. At the same instant Alison uttered a brief quick cry of pain; instinctively she covered her eye with her hand; and Hugh, wheeling round in dismay, perceived where one of his flies had caught. His face turned deadly white—far whiter than hers, indeed—and he was quite paralyzed with fear: it was Ludovick Macdonell who took Alison's hand and gently removed it.

"You must let me look," he said to her, and he held her hand lest she should put it back. To his great relief he found that the hook had not entered the eye; but it had caught the edge of the under eyelid, and was lightly fixed there.

"Tell Hugh not to mind," was the first thing she said—as if she were already blind, and speaking of some distant person whom she could not see.

"But you needn't be frightened, Alison," Ludovick said to her, with eager assurance, though he himself was in considerable doubt as to what should be done. "The hook is not in your eye; it has only caught the eyelid. Hugh, have you got a pair of scissors in your fly-book?"

It was with trembling fingers that the wretched lad got out the pair of scissors, and handed them to Macdonell, who as a preliminary measure snipped the casting line close to the fly. Then he said to her—

"Look here, Alison, I believe I could take it out myself, now, and without hurting you much, if you cared to run the risk; but perhaps it will be safer to wait until we get back to Fort William, and then the Doctor can make certain of it."

"I would rather you would take it out," she said calmly enough.

"No, Alison, no!" Flora entreated. "Don't run any risk! Wait till we get home!"

"It would be safer," Captain Ludovick said—but he was still addressing Alison, "except for this—that the hook might work itself farther in."

"I would like you to take it out now, if you would be so kind," she said to him simply.

"Well, if you like to trust me—but it will hurt a little," he said.

"I don't mind that," she answered.

And still he hesitated; for it was something of a responsibility; besides, he did not know how much pain he might inflict—and how much more gladly would he have borne it himself!

"I would rather cut it out of my own finger," he said, "even if it was in both barb and shank. Are you quite sure you won't draw back your head when you find me take hold of the hook?"

"I shall not move."

For safety's sake he put one hand on her shoulder; but she was firm enough; she did not flinch a hair's-breadth even when she felt him cautiously take hold of the hook.

"Are you ready, Alison?"

"Yes."

"Quite?"

"Quite."

Then there was a quick little jerk. She uttered no cry; she merely kept her eyes closed until Flora called to her joyously—

"Alison, it's all right! Ludovick has got it out!—it's all right, isn't it?"

The girl opened her eyes, which were moist with the pain caused by that sudden twitch; but even through these involuntary tears she could smile her thanks to the operator—and her eyes were expressive enough when she chose.

"I hope I didn't hurt you much," said he; "but really it was better to get it out at once: you've no idea how horrid a thing it is to cut a hook out, when once the barb has got right in. Take your handkerchief now, Alison, and dip it in the water, and bathe your eye a little. Why, there's hardly a speck—just the smallest bit of skin torn away. I wish I had a looking-glass of some kind."

"Why?" she asked.

He smiled a little—indeed he seemed quite gratified over the success of his experiment, and he was talking at random and carelessly now.

"Well, it was this way: I was living in a rather dilapidated shooting-lodge up in Ross-shire, and one evening the ceiling of the kitchen fell in. There was a mighty noise; and of course we all rushed to the place; and then we found that the plaster had knocked down a young servant-girl who happened to be there, and she was lying senseless—though it turned out she was more frightened than hurt. I noticed this, though, that when everything was being done to reassure the unfortunate creature after she came to, the old house-keeper did best of all—she ran away and got a hand-glass, and made the girl look in it to convince herself that she was not disfigured in any way.

I thought the old woman had some knowledge of human nature."

"Then I will be your hand-glass, Alison!" Flora cried quite joyfully. "And I declare to you that there's nothing but a small pink scratch—oh, hardly bigger than a pin's head! Disfigurement? Nothing of the kind. And you're looking just as nice and trim and provokingly neat as ever, if that is any comfort to you!"

Alison laughed a little; but there was still gratitude in her eyes as she obeyed Ludovick's directions as to the use of the wet handkerchief.

This was the end of the fishing, or attempted fishing—indeed, the boat had meanwhile drifted down and imbedded itself in a mass of water-lilies; so they got ashore and prepared for their march down through the hills to the spot where the waggonette was awaiting them. Hugh was deeply mortified and apologetic; again and again he returned to the subject, upbraiding his own stupidity, until Alison had seriously to ask him what it was she had suffered. But he was not to be comforted; and when everything was ready he walked off by himself, and would have gone on by himself, only that Flora hastened to overtake him, and give him of her sisterly sympathy and remonstrance. The consequence of this arrangement was that Captain Ludovick and Alison brought up the rear by themselves, for the boy John had gone forward some time before with the luncheon-basket.

And then Alison took heart of grace.

"I don't think you were very friendly with me this morning," she said, with her eyes cast down.

He seemed a little surprised.

"I hope I was not unfriendly," he said. "But—but I thought it was better that I should let you understand that I did not mean to harass you—or—or vex you."

"You promised that we were to be firm and fast friends," she said a little proudly.

"Yes?" he said.

"And yet you called me 'Miss Alison' all the morning —until you had to take the hook out of my eyelid," she continued, with growing confidence—for it seemed so easy and natural to talk to him here: she was quite resolved on having a thorough understanding with him, if he wished it also.

"Do you think I like to call you 'Miss' Alison?" he responded. "No, I don't. I think of you as Alison; and I suppose I might as well say it. But I did not wish to embarrass you."

"Well, you wouldn't embarrass me by calling me Alison," she said, as they walked on together.

"It will be a great deal more pleasant for me," he made answer again. "Mind you, I want to be to you, now and always, just what you wish me to be. You gave me your last word, and I accepted it; and my mouth is shut—until —well, I am not going to risk anything by speaking. Let our friendship be as close and firm and fast as it can be. But I wonder if you would be offended, Alison, if I told you something about yourself?"

She raised her eyes, and met his bravely.

"Offended? I am sure *not*," she said.

"Well, then," said he, with a trace of shyness that rather became him, "I can't help thinking that you are a far more human kind of a being when you are in the Highlands; and sometimes I can't help thinking of what might happen if only you were always living among us."

CHAPTER XV.

PRINCESS DEIRDRI.

THAT, at all events, she was a very different kind of being up in these regions was very well known to herself; for whether it was the fresh air and exercise, or the cheerful society and constant occupation, or the delight of looking at the beautiful things surrounding her, or all of these combined, certain it is that the whole day long a sort of elation seemed to thrill through her to the very finger-tips. Every moment was full of life. Even when she was away alone—up among the hills whither she used to climb in order to have a view of the wider waters in the south—there was no sadness in her mind, but rather a sense of jubilation, and thankfulness, and content with all the world. The wildest days of gloom, so far from having any terror for her, exercised over her a singular fascination; she rejoiced in the foreboding of the storm; she welcomed the coming of this terrible unknown thing that darkened the heavens and the earth. For what might not these sombre mountains bring forth—the great masses of them in communion with the lowering clouds, and here and there retreating behind a mystic veil of rain? The driven sea—its lurid green broken by white flashes of foam—and the wind that tore by her in sudden gusts and squalls seemed awful and threatening; and yet she had no fear of them; rather they made her strong to withstand, and defiant, and even proud of their angry and vengeful look. Then, sometimes, a soft sun-touched hill-

side would slowly emerge from behind those gray mists of showers, and a rainbow would declare itself against the purple masses of the clouds; and here and there the running sea would be struck a vivid green by following shafts of light. And then all this changing phantasmagoria was quite near to her; not remote and passively picturesque like the views of Switzerland she had seen; but quite close around her, and she part of them, and mysteriously associated with them, a child of the universe like themselves. No, even in these wild days of storm and tempest she had no fear; these winds and clouds and sun-swept seas were friendly things; she loved to be alone with them, and listen to their strange uncertain voices. Sometimes she wondered whether they understood her, and her presence there, any better than she understood them.

And the glooms and terrors and anxious perplexities of Kirk o' Shields? She had forgotten them! She had forgotten that Ludovick Macdonell was a Roman Catholic, a dangerous person, in league with priests and persecutors, a worshipper of the scarlet woman, the woman drunken with the blood of the Saints. She was too light-hearted and busy to think of such things; the present moment was full of gladness and occupation; when she looked in his face, and met his frank and pleasant smile, she did not remember anything about the scarlet woman and the beast that came out of the bottomless pit. When he was walking by her side along the shores of Loch Eil, or telling her stories in the stern of Hugh's lug-sail boat, or giving her a hand at the steep places of the hill-side, why, he was just Ludovick!—and she did not bother her head about anything else. And it must be said that the companionship of these two had become a very pronounced and notorious thing. They made no kind of concealment about it—Alison least of all. They were

continually together, during the long walks and drives, when they went on sailing expeditions, as they sat in the garden on these clear and still summer evenings, or went in-doors to see how that mild game of poker was going on. He did not address himself much to her, nor she to him; but somehow they were never very far away from each other; and they seemed entirely satisfied with this half-silent comradeship. It was "Alison" and "Ludovick" now; they were as belonging to the one family, along with Flora and Hugh; and the various excuses that Captain Ludovick made for coming over from Oyre and planning new excursions were simply innumerable; while even during his brief absences there was always some reminder of his existence and of his remembrance making its way to the house in which Alison lived.

It was altogether a very extraordinary state of affairs. But for the name of the thing, they were to all outward appearance conducting themselves precisely as a pair of affianced lovers, and that without any concealment or embarrassment. Nominally they were merely friends, of course; but this friendship that Alison had boldly claimed, and that Captain Ludovick was in nowise inclined to withhold, seemed to be of an extremely devoted and exclusive kind. And not only did the other members of the household tacitly acquiesce in these relations, but Aunt Gilchrist in especial looked on with open approval. She no longer appeared to regard Captain Macdonell as a possible fortune-hunter. The fact is, she had indignantly resented the insolence, as she deemed it, of the Cowan family in endeavouring to carry away her ward, her especial charge, to marry her to that poor voiceless probationer; and she had given everybody to understand that she, Jane Gilchrist, meant to put her foot down upon that little scheme. She intimated plainly enough that she had already made some kind of settlement upon

Alison, and that she had not the slightest intention of allowing any portion of her money to find its way into the pockets of the "stickit minister."

"No, no! Alison, my dear," the old dame said openly. "I'm a wilful woman when I take anything into my head; and I tell ye I'm ready to defy the whole o' that congregation—elders, deacons, precentors, and all the rest of them!"

"Yes, Aunt Gilchrist," Alison said, with a smile, "it's easy to defy them when you don't live among them."

"Ay, is that it?" the old lady said, with a sharp look. "Are ye feared to go back? Well, just tell them that I'll maybe not let ye go back. Tell them I've bought ye for my own. You're nothing but a white slave. And I should not wonder if I did not let ye marry at all."

"I'm sure I don't want to get married, aunt," said Alison cheerfully; "I am very happy as I am."

"Oh yes," Aunt Gilchrist made answer, half to herself. "They all say that! But it's wonderful how quick they can change their mind when the occasion comes."

Nothing further was said just then, for at this moment Captain Ludovick happened to make his appearance, driving up the waggonette that belonged to Oyre. They were all bound on an expedition into the Braes of Lochaber—the excuse this time being that the horses at Oyre did not get nearly enough exercise; and as everything was ready, the whole of the party forthwith took their places. By rights Aunt Gilchrist should have been given the post of honour next the driver; but as she declared she preferred going inside, it was remarkable with what equanimity Alison, at Captain Ludovick's suggestion, got up and occupied the seat beside him. After all, she was a kind of stranger and guest; and no doubt Captain Ludovick wanted to point out to her the objects of interest along the road.

It was a pleasant morning for setting out; the distant village of Corpach was shining white among its scattered trees; and the little gray monument to Colonel Cameron of Fassiefern could be seen distinctly enough under the velvet-soft slopes of the hills. They drove out and past the ruins of Inverlochy Castle, that seemed to have grown dark with tradition and tales of strife and slaughter; and by-and-by, when they had got away to the north of Ben Nevis, they entered a wild moorland country—the long, bare undulations bounded by dark green pine-woods, and these again leading the eye up to the loftier hills, that were all picturesquely dappled with sunshine and shadow. This in truth was rather a monotonous highway—its chief feature being the roadside cairns of stones built up where a funeral procession had rested the coffin on their way to the churchyard in the lonely glen; and perhaps it was the sight of these rude memorials that induced Captain Ludovick to tell his companion the sad story of Princess Deirdri, whose name is supposed to linger in that of the vitrified fort, Dundearduil, in Glen Nevis. The beautiful Irish princess, as some may care to know, was beloved of King Connacher of Ulster, but she would have nothing to do with him, seeing that he was old and ugly, red-haired and squint-eyed, whereupon Connacher shut her up in prison. But there were three young men, nephews of the king, who were sorry for the captive princess; and they succeeded in freeing her, and in escaping along with a party of followers across the seas to the western Highlands, where they settled first of all upon the shores of Loch Etive. Whether Naos, one of the three brothers, and the Princess Deirdri had been in love with each other before they forsook their native country is not stated; however, in this new land they did love each other, and were married, and lived in great happiness. After several years the King of Ulster professed to forgive them, and invited

them to go home again; and the Princess Deirdri was against that, having anxious forebodings of treachery; but eventually they persuaded her to go. It was on her voyage across the seas that she composed her lament on leaving the various places where she had been so happy; and the story tells how all her companions were moved to tears as she sang—

"Glen Etive, O Glen Etive,
There was raised my earliest home,
Beautiful were its woods on rising,
When the sun fell on Glen Etive!
* * * *
Glenorchy, O Glenorchy,
The straight glen of smooth ridges;
No man of his age was so joyful
As my Naos in Glenorchy!
* * * *
Glenmassan, O Glenmassan,
Long its grass, and fair its woodland glades;
All to ourselves was the place of our repose
On grassy Invermassan!"

Deirdri's mournful anticipations proved correct; Connacher, finding her more beautiful than ever, straightway slew her husband, hoping to win her for himself; but the faithful princess did not linger behind—she managed to borrow a knife from a boatman, plunged it into her bosom, and fell dead on her husband's corpse, so that the lovers went together into lands still more unknown than even the far Glen Etive and Lochaber.

Such was the substance of the tale he told her; and then he went on to say—

"I knew of another Princess Deirdri, though whenever I think of her I suffer a pretty sharp twinge of remorse. This is how it was. I was once at a small shooting-box right away up in the highest region of the Monaghlea hills—the most lonely and unfrequented place you could imagine—and one morning we were up in the corries driving the woods for black game. The beaters were just

getting to the end of a drive, when a young roebuck came flashing out of the bushes and crossed me about thirty yards off—it was an easy shot, and I dropped him. But the next moment I began to wonder at any roe-deer being so high up in the hills, for they generally keep to the woods and glens farther down; so when the keepers came along, I asked them. Then I found out what I had done. Quite early in the summer a young buck and a young doe had come straying up into these wilds, and I suppose they had taken a fancy to the neighbourhood, for they remained there, though none of the rest of the herd ever followed them. They had the whole place to themselves; and when the keepers happened to come on them they were always found together, either feeding about among the rocks or lying on the warm heather. This morning the beaters had again stumbled on them; but the doe had doubled back and escaped; it was the young buck that unfortunately came within reach of my gun—and there that idyl ended. I was mighty sorry for it, I can tell you," he continued, as they were leisurely driving along. "I've often thought of the fine time those two must have had together—for it is a very pretty place up there—lovely little glens, and clear streams, and birch-woods—and all that summer they had the whole district to themselves. And a very handsome young roebuck he was too: I've got his head mounted at Oyre. But I've never shot a roe-deer since."

"And what became of the other one?" Alison asked.

"Well, she was seen about the woods for some little time after, and then she disappeared. I suppose she went back to the herd; and I sometimes wonder whether that Princess Deirdri used to think of the happy days she spent with her Naos up in the Corrie-nan-Shean. I don't like to think of that idyl of the hills—but it has saved the life of many a roebuck since."

Now, the hapless young Irish princess came into their

talk still once again that day, and in this wise. They had driven away along Glen Spean (and it was with no little interest that she regarded Keppoch House, for she had come to know a good deal about the Macdonells of Keppoch, and their deeds of other days) until they came to Bridge of Roy; and as this was the end of their drive they stopped at the solitary little inn; the horses were taken out while they went inside to order lunch. But luncheon in the Highlands is not supposed to be complete without boiled potatoes; and while these were being got ready, Captain Ludovick and Alison went out for a stroll about the place, their wandering footsteps eventually leading them down to the river. They talked of various things, but only now and again, for this companionship of theirs seemed to suffice without any effort at mutual entertainment; and when at length they reached the bridge they paused there, and Alison, the better to look down into the rocky chasm through which the clear brown water flowed, placed both arms on the rude stone parapet, and bent her head over. Nothing was said for some time; she was used to silence, and content with it; it was enough for her that Ludovick was near.

But presently he took hold of her hand, and she did not withdraw it, as, in their present relations, she ought to have done.

"Alison," said he, "isn't it about time to have done with this make-believe?"

She flushed quickly, and raised her head a little bit, so that she could see his face if she chose.

"What make-believe?" she asked, though well she knew.

"The pretence of being only friends," he answered. "I love you; I think you love me: what is the use of hiding it?"

"What is the use of anything else?" she said rather

wistfully. Then she raised her head somewhat, and spoke with greater cheerfulness: "Are we not happy enough as we are, Ludovick?"

"As we are!" he exclaimed. "Yes, this is all very well—and it's very pleasant for us to be continually together—but don't you sometimes look forward a little bit? It's very pleasant for me to be seeing you nearly every day, and to be with you for hours and hours at a stretch; but how long will it last? You will be going away. You won't be so happy then, will you? I shall not, I know. And as for yourself, Alison, don't you rather think you will be like the Princess Deirdri when she was bidding good-bye to all the places she had known; and don't you think you will look back more than once to the days when you and I were together here? But there won't be so much happiness then."

Her eyes were filled with sudden tears; she turned away her head.

"Indeed I know that," she said, in a low voice that was rather uncertain. "I have—gone through that before."

"Very well," said he, at once, "let us take the other way. What is the use of concealment? There is no use in it any longer. Let me write this very evening to your father, and I will tell him that you and I mean to get married—what can be simpler than that?"

She suddenly rose erect, and faced him with frightened eyes.

"Oh no, I couldn't do that!" she said breathlessly. "I couldn't, Ludovick!—I—I daren't!"

"Very well," said he gently. "Perhaps that is too much—too abrupt. But what I want to do is to convince you that you entirely exaggerate the horror which your friends and relatives would exhibit if they were told you were going to marry a Catholic. I don't believe they

would show any horror at all. It is the Catholic doctrines and ritual they hold in abhorrence; and they would know well enough that neither would concern you in the least—that you need have nothing to do with either. Then your family have seen me—they know I haven't cloven feet and horns——"

"I did not tell them you were a Catholic, Ludovick," she said rather ruefully.

"I wish now you had," he made answer. "But never mind. Here is my proposal. Perhaps making the announcement in that way to your father would be too abrupt. But I want to get you to believe that there will be no such wild dismay as you expect. Very well: write to your sister Agnes, and tell her frankly all about it. Confide in her. You will see what she says; and I am pretty certain it won't alarm you."

She looked up again with more hopefulness in her eyes.

"I thought of it once, Ludovick," she said rather shyly.

"Do it now, then — this evening," said he. "But, then, do it the right way. Don't put it before her as if it were some vague proposition that might as well be dismissed, for the better comfort of everybody concerned. Alison," he continued, regarding her, "you will tell her that the relationship between you and me is something beyond recall. It is so, is it not?"

He could hardly hear her answer.

"I—I hope so, Ludovick."

He grasped her hand more tightly than ever.

"Then let this be the first step, my darling; and you will see that your fears will vanish away one by one. You have courage enough for anything — I can see it every day—and why not for this? Come away now—yonder is Flora at the door of the inn, waving a handkerchief for us. And don't you forget to tell everything quite frankly to your sister."

As they were walking back to the inn she looked up to him with a smile.

"Do you know, Ludovick," said she, "that when I am with you, when I hear you talking, I have no fears at all! Everything seems quite simple and easy."

And indeed when they had returned to the inn, and all of them were seated round the table in the little parlour, no one could have imagined from her manner that any very serious conversation had taken place between these two on Roy Bridge. She was quite animated and cheerful; and submitted to some raillery on the part of Aunt Gilchrist with the greatest of good-humour. It is true that during the long drive home she was somewhat silent; and the moment she entered the house she went to her own room, and remained there for a considerable time. And when she came out again and despatched Johnny to the post-office with the letter she had written, she seemed restless and uneasy; and she even lingered about the front garden, pretending to examine the various shrubs, until he had actually come back again. But when she had ascertained from him that the letter had been definitely and irretrievably posted, her countenance cleared considerably; and, probably to make light of her previous disquietude, she casually asked John whether he had ever been to Bridge of Roy.

"No, mem, it's a long weh from here," said John.

But seeing that Alison did not immediately dismiss him, Johnny made bold to ask her if she had been at the burial-ground that morning when they were up in the Braes.

"What burial-ground, Johnny?" she inquired of him.

"Well, I am not remembering the name of it," said Johnny, after a moment's pause, "but it is up in the hills whateffer, and many's the time I hef heard of it. The old people used to be buried there for years and years. But what I hef been told is thus," John continued, with

a demure twinkle in his eye, "that they were burying a Protestant in that place, where there wass none but Catholics pefore; and ever after that at night there wass a terrible noise of clashing of swords and shields and dirks; and ahl the people living there were frightened to go by that way. Oh, a terrible noise it wass; and when they went to the Free Church minister—well, mebbe he wass not believing the story, but he could do nothing at ahl; and the darker the night the more ahful the clashing and the noise. Cosh, I think the Protestant man was a ferry good fighter, when the whole of them could not put him out! And then it grew to be so bad that they had to send for a Catholic priest; and he brought some holy water with him, and said the prayers over the ground, and now it is ahl quate again. But I know I would not like to be going near that place at night."

"Are you a Protestant or a Catholic, Johnny?" Alison asked, with a new kind of interest.

Johnny looked at her inquiringly for a second.

"What will you be for being yourself, mem?" he said cautiously.

But this return question was a very shocking thing. It was perfectly obvious that this Laodicean sought to find out what her faith was merely that he might cheerfully declare himself of the same way of thinking; and she could not countenance any such piece of depravity; so she made some excuse for breaking off the conversation, and departed into the house.

It was a couple of days thereafter that she received the answer to the letter she had sent to Kirk o' Shields. Flora and she had been out driving with Aunt Gilchrist until late in the afternoon (for a wonder, Captain Ludovick was not with them—he had been summoned away on business); and when they returned home they

were met by Hugh, who declared that he had been working hard all day, and besought the two girls to go out with him for a row in the gig, for there was a clear evening light shining all around, and the loch was still. Flora good-naturedly acquiesced, and so did Alison; and both of them would have forthwith gone down to the shore, but that Hugh happened to say—

"Oh, there's a letter for you, Alison, lying on the lobby-table. Shall I bring it for you?"

"No," she said rather hastily—and with some colour mounting to her face, for she guessed what this might be—"I will get it myself. Will you go down to the boat, Flora? I shall be after you in a moment."

So she quickly went back through the garden, entered the house, and found the letter lying there. Rather breathlessly she tore it open, and glanced rapidly over its several pages, with a wonderful strange feeling rising and rising in her heart. For what was all this? Remonstrances?—reproaches?—warnings of the opprobrium she was earning for herself, and the shame she was bringing on those nearest and dearest to her? No; it was far from that; and she read with an ever-increasing wonder and a joy that she could hardly have explained to herself. The astonishing thing was that Agnes did not even once refer to the fact of Ludovick Macdonell being a Catholic—though that had been put prominently enough in Alison's letter to her. This was all praise of Ludovick Macdonell himself; though how Agnes could have discerned so many fine and admirable qualities in him during the brief hour of his visit, her sister was far too surprised and pleased to stay to inquire. And very affectionately did Agnes write of Alison herself—quite unusually so, indeed, for people in Kirk o' Shields are reticent in such matters; but now there was a convenient distance separating them; and she could say things on paper that probably she

would not have said to Alison herself. And not only did the younger sister appear extremely gratified, and even proud, that Alison was going to marry the young man who had seemed to her so much of a hero, but also she said plainly that she was glad the arrangement on which the Cowan family counted was not going to be carried out. She confessed that she had always looked forward to seeing Alison a minister's wife; there was something so wise and gentle and thoughtful about her that she would be a great help and comfort to a congregation; but James Cowan was not her ideal of a young minister; moreover, until he got a church, she feared Alison would have been unhappy while living at Corbieslaw. And might she write to Captain Macdonell, to congratulate him? And would he answer her letter? She wanted to tell him a good deal about her sister that perhaps he had not discovered yet. Of course, if this was to be a secret in the mean time, as Alison appeared to desire, then a secret it should be; but she did not understand why there was any necessity. And then the letter wound up with all sorts of kind wishes and messages: it was about as comforting an epistle as could have been composed in these peculiar circumstances.

For many and many a day thereafter that happy evening lingered in Alison's memory, though she hardly knew how she got through the garden, and across the road, and down the shingle to the boat that was awaiting her. The air seemed full of music; this was like a love-letter that had been sent her; all kinds of wistful fancies that had once been discarded were summoned back now; and she wished to say just two words to Ludovick, and to look into his eyes.

"You seem to have had good news, Alison," said Flora to her, when she had got seated at the tiller, and the two cousins were leisurely pulling out into the loch.

"Yes," she answered, with her cheeks grown rosy-red, "I—I have had a very kind letter—from Agnes."

"Oh, from Agnes?" Flora repeated, with a glance of surprise; but she said nothing further; and presently brother and sister had settled into their long and steady stroke, which seemed to afford them sufficient interest and occupation.

As for Alison, she did not care to break the gracious silence that was all around them; her heart was murmuring to her of its happiness as they pulled along. She did not think of asking herself whether there was not something suspicious in the fact of Agnes having so completely ignored all her references to Captain Ludovick being a Catholic, and the possible trouble arising therefrom; she did not reflect that her sister might, out of an extreme delicacy and kindness, have refused, at such a time, to say anything that would dim her tender hopes. No; she only thought that she would like to show this letter to Ludovick. Did it not confirm all his prognostications? Was it not a fair beginning? Her heart within her said yes again and again, with an exceeding comfort and joy.

Moreover, she had plenty of time to weave these fond fancies; for the two cousins, as they worked away at the oars, were humming together snatches of Gaelic airs that did not interfere with her. It was a beautiful evening, now that the sun had sunk behind the western hills: just above the lofty peaks the sky was of the clearest gold, fading into a pale translucent purple overhead; while the waters of the loch around them were all of a trembling and lapping lilac-gray, with the universal, sudden, bewildering ripples grown almost black. As the time went by, the twilight became more wan and ghostly; and yet the objects along the opposite shore, under the darkening hills and the pine-woods, could be made out

with a strange, a livid, distinctness. Then the first lights began to appear—a quivering orange ray here and there that told of a distant window or perhaps of an anchored yacht making all snug for the night. When they finally got ashore, and made their way up to the house through the garden, the slumbering air was sweet with the scents of the flowers, and there were bats flitting about the eaves, suddenly swooping between them and the pale, clear sky. On the threshold she paused and looked back. It was an evening long to be remembered—an evening of visions and dreams.

CHAPTER XVI.

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE.

But, as it happened, the very next day brought another communication from Kirk o' Shields that was destined to lead the way to a sudden and unexpected crisis. A little accident helped. When Aunt Gilchrist took the as yet unopened envelope with her into the parlour, where the rest of the family were seated at the table for afternoon tea—the Doctor having also dropped in by chance—and just as she was about to sit down, she struck her foot sharply against the leg of the chair. For a second she bit her lip in silence, and it was clear she was suffering considerable pain; then she muttered to herself—

"Dang this confounded thing!"

"Your language, Jane," said the Doctor, quite good-naturedly, "might be a little more gentle."

"Oh, my language!" she said, opening forth in wrath. "My language, indeed! You can talk fine enough about your oxides, and sulphates, and trash o' that kind, to bamboozle a lot of fools!—but much good your long-winded names have ever done to me! Here, Alison, run away and get me a cloth slipper—this infernal fire is like to burn my toe off, now it's begun again!"

Alison went quickly away, and returned with a pair of cloth slippers, and forthwith the hurt foot was in a measure relieved. But when Alison was for unbuttoning the other boot, her aunt said no—the one was enough.

"Why, aunt," she protested, "do you mean to say you

can sit in comfort with a boot on one foot and a shoe on the other?"

"Oh, listen, mother," Flora cried. "Isn't that like Alison? Isn't she prim and precise? She's bound to grow up an old maid!"

"More likely," Master Hugh put in, "she'll grow up to be like the old lady who declared she couldn't go in proper style to have her photograph taken until she had put some eau-de-Cologne on her handkerchief"—though it is to be imagined that that apocryphal old lady was an invention of the moment.

But meanwhile Aunt Gilchrist had taken her seat, looking very gloomy, for she was vexed that Periphery should have been so easily aroused again. And perhaps she was all the more taciturn that the young Munroes chose to make themselves surreptitiously merry over her accident, and that they were openly aided and abetted by the Doctor, while Mrs. Munro looked on and listened in mild amusement. Aunt Gilchrist would have nothing to say to that ribald crew. Nay, to escape from them and their covert jeers, she betook herself to her letter, which otherwise might have lain unopened on the table.

And presently it was perceived that the contents thereof were exciting her in no common degree. Indeed, her astonishment and resentment caused her to break forth into brief muttered exclamations—exclamations that showed clearly enough what was passing in her mind.

"Well, I declare!" she cried, with withering contempt. "Bless my soul and body, the woman's mad!—stark, staring mad! But I'll teach her! To talk to me like this! Well, I never did hear the like!"

"What's your news, Jane?" the Doctor asked.

"It's somebody that wants a lesson taught them," said she, looking up fiercely. "And, my word, they'll get it!"

"If it's anything serious," said he amiably enough, "I wouldn't advise you to answer it in your present state of mind."

"My present state of mind!" she retorted with scorn. "What do you know about my present state of mind! I suppose you would like to doctor that too!—brown messes and white messes—once every three hours—to be well shaken—is that the thing this time? Man, man—Duncan, I wonder ye do not take all your phosphates and hydrates and stuff down to the sea some dark night and tumble them in when there's nobody looking!"

"I might as well, if I had many patients like you, Jane," her brother said with great good-humour; and presently, this frugal meal being ended, he was the first to rise, as his professional duties called him away again.

But Aunt Gilchrist took Alison with her to her own room.

"There, read that!" said the incensed little dame. 'Read that, Alison, and tell me if there's another such impudent woman in the whole wide world!"

Alison took the letter—which she at once perceived to be from Mrs. Cowan of Corbieslaw—and carefully and deliberately read it through; but as she had no nerves on fire to worry her, she did not find in it anything calculated to arouse so fierce a storm of indignation. She was very much embarrassed, it is true; for it was all about herself and her prospects; but in so far as the tone of this communication towards Aunt Gilchrist was concerned, it was almost servile—indeed it may have been the specious plausibility of the whole epistle that had irritated the recipient of it.

"Well, aunt," said Alison, "I don't see anything in that to anger you."

"Nothing to anger me!" she exclaimed. "What right has that woman to interfere with me? What business

has she to write to me at all? So you're 'devoted to the service of the Lord,' are you, 'and the interests of His church?' Indeed, now! But does she think I cannot tell what that means? Ay, but I can, though: I was not born yesterday, Alison, my dear; not a bit of it! The service of the Lord is that I'm to provide that stickit minister with a house and a wife at the same time, and support the whole concern. Oh, that's a fine way of providing for him; better than waiting and waiting for a pulpit. A pulpit, my word! To stick up a crayture like that in a pulpit: I'll tell ye what he's better fit for—I'd stick him up in a cornfield, to frighten the crows away! And then 'the distractions and temptations surrounding young people,'" Aunt Gilchrist continued, turning to the letter again. "Tell me now, Alison: do ye think this woman has a suspicion that there's something between you and Captain Macdonell?"

Alison flushed a rose-red, but she answered frankly enough—

"I don't know, aunt. It is quite possible. I wrote to Agnes the other day about—about Ludovick; and she may by chance have dropped some hint. Or perhaps it's this—Mr. James Cowan met me walking with—with Captain Macdonell in Kirk o' Shields one day, and he may have spoken to her about the stranger—and—and perhaps that's it."

"So *I'm* to be her cat's-paw, am I?" Aunt Gilchrist resumed, still indignant with this hapless letter. "*I'm* to see that the stickit minister is provided for? And it's all for the service of the Lord, of course, and the interests of the church! My certes, I'll send her an answer she little expects: I'll teach her to dictate to me, with her cringing, fawning, sneaking pretences!"

Then she turned to Alison herself.

"Now, Alison," said she, in a much gentler way, "I'm

not blinder than other people; and I've seen the way that you and your Captain Ludovick, as they call him, are aye together. I'm not going to ask ye questions, for young folk will have their secrets—it's part of the play, I suppose; but this I will say to you—this I'm bound to say to you—that ye need not be afraid to speak to me about *him*. No, I give ye my word: I've seen enough of him, and I will say this, that a finer, franker, better-natured young man never stepped in shoes. I was not quite so certain about him at one time; and I took the leeberty of giving him a hint or two—for I'm an old woman, Alison, and ye're a young one; but I do honestly believe this now—I do honestly believe he would take ye this minute if ye had not a penny."

"Aunt," said Alison—but there were tears of gratitude trembling on her lashes, and her voice was not very firm—"there would have been no concealment—and least of all from you—but it all seemed so hopeless. It was broken off because I—because I told him they would never agree to it. He is a Catholic."

"Yes, that's true, he is a Catholic—I had forgotten that. But who's they? That woman Cowan?" said Aunt Gilchrist, beginning to sniff and fume again at the mere mention of her enemy. "What have they got to do with you? Who asked their permission? If you want to marry the young man, what business is it of theirs whether he is a Catholic or not? The impudence of some people, I do declare!"

"No, aunt, it wasn't the Cowans I was mostly thinking of, nor yet the congregation generally, though I made sure they would be terribly against it; but it is my own family, my father especially. And I thought about Agnes too; but I wrote to her, just to try—and—and I got a letter from her that was a great surprise, so kind it was, and not a word about his being a Catholic."

"And Macdonell—what does he say to all this, eh?" was the next inquiry.

"Well, aunt," Alison made answer, with downcast eyes, "you know he has been away the last day or two, and I haven't been able to show him Agnes's letter."

"Agnes's letter!" she repeated. "But I suppose he wants to make you his wife, whatever any one may say?"

"I—I think so," was the half-heard answer.

"And I think so too!" Aunt Gilchrist said, with a proud kind of laugh. "Oh, I'll warrant him! Well, Alison, you may be off now, for I'm going to send this woman her answer—oh yes, it'll be an answer, I can tell ye—when I think of the look of her face when she gets it, I could just skip round this room like a three-year-old, only there's that little fire-deevil sitting watching on my toes. And here's another thing, Alison: ye may tell me your secrets, or ye may not tell me your secrets, just as ye please; but ye'll see if I don't make it all fair and straight with your Captain Ludovick as soon as he comes back to Fort William."

Alison lingered, still regarding that letter.

"Aunt Gilchrist," said she, "you must not say anything that will vex the Cowans. They are great friends of my father's; and they are important people in the church."

"The wise little woman!" Aunt Gilchrist said, with another laugh. "Well, perhaps I'll not answer the fool according to her folly; but I'll give her a bit of my mind all the same. Now go away, and tell Flora to stop that strumming, for I'm going to write."

So Alison departed—very grateful to Aunt Gilchrist for the kindly things she had said about Captain Ludovick, but not much reassured otherwise. She knew very well that this brisk, independent, cheerful little Gallio was about the last person to understand the Kirk o' Shields folk, or what they would think of this proposed

marriage. Her ways were not as their ways. The simple and self-sufficing formula, "The Lord made us, and He'll take care of us," was a very different thing from their fierce contentions of creed, their strenuous and anxious faith in their own sectarianism. Aunt Gilchrist was delighted to make the most of life and enjoy the good things of this world: with them a heart-searching renunciation was the first duty of every Christian, and an austere contemning of this world the surest passport to the next. And if she seemed disposed to make light of the fact that Ludovick Macdonell was a Catholic, Alison was well aware that the members of East Street Church would be in no such mind.

Meanwhile it was remarkable that when Captain Ludovick was absent from Fort William the days did not pass nearly so quickly; and frequently, when her cousins were otherwise occupied, and her aunt did not need her assistance, Alison had to be content with the companionship of the boy John. She was trying to reform Johnny now; but the task was an uphill one. When she endeavoured to reason him out of his belief in witches and warlocks and malevolent spirits, he answered with all kinds of stories of what had actually happened. And then when she remonstrated with him about his own conduct —his cruelty and malice and revengeful tricks—Johnny had always some excuse or another for his wickedness. One morning, as she was getting ready to go downstairs, she casually went to the window, which was a habit she had unconsciously formed. She did not wish to play the spy on Johnny; but this window commanded a view of the garden, the road, and the shore; and if Johnny was anywhere about, he was sure to be in some mischief or other; so that she was continually catching him in this fashion, after which she would go and lecture him severely. On this occasion she perceived that Johnny was

merely talking to a small boy who was outside the railings, in the road; and there did not seem much harm in that. It was clear that Johnny was trying to persuade the small boy to come round by the gate into the garden; but the other shook his head and remained where he was. Thereupon Johnny took something out of his pocket and showed it. The small boy approached a little nearer. Then Alison made out that what Johnny held in his hand was a common clay pipe; and now he pulled out a match and lit the pipe, which he passed through the railings to the small boy, who began to smoke. She was very angry that John should have been teaching that flaxen-haired urchin so wicked a practice; but little did she know what it all meant. She went back to finish her dressing, resolved to rebuke him by-and-by.

When she got hold of him later on she said sternly—

"What were you about this morning, Johnny? I suppose you thought no one saw you? How dare you go and teach a little boy to smoke tobacco!"

Now Johnny, so far from being disconcerted or frightened, grinned in honest anticipation that she would enjoy his little joke.

"Aw, Cosh, it wass the finest thing I ever sah!" said he. "He wass getting seecker and seecker, and whiter and whiter; and before he went aweh he could scarcely crahl along the road!"

Then a suspicion of the truth flashed upon her.

"Do you mean to say," she demanded, "that you deliberately got that little boy to smoke in order to make him sick?"

"Well," said Johnny, sturdily, "there hass been more as once that him and his big brother they were throwing stons at me. And I said to myself, 'Ferry well; throw aweh; it is your turn now, but it will be my turn some other time.'"

"Yes," said she indignantly, "but you took good care it was not the big brother you were revenged on!"

Johnny was not a whit abashed by this taunt.

"Well," said he, "the big brother is bigger than me, and he throws stons at me; and if the little one is smaller than me, then it is my turn. Two is too many for one; but when you get them separate, then is the chance. Cosh, that one will not be for throwing stons for a little while! And if he did not want to smok, what made him smok?"

"I suppose you pretended to be friends with him?" said she; but in truth she despaired of bringing this incorrigible lad to a sense of his iniquities.

Johnny grinned again.

"Oh ay, he wass ferry suspeecious at the first. Mebbe he thought there wass gunpoother in the pipe. But I had to light it myself and gif it to him; and I said he would never be a man at ahl until he learned to smok; and I said that smokkin wass ferry nice—and mebbe so it uz, or they would not be ahl at it. But where is he now?" continued Johnny, with a sudden incoherent laugh of fiendishness. "Well, I think he is lying down on the shore, with his head on the cold stons, and his cheeks as white as a sheet of paper!"

"I suppose you think it very clever to torture a small boy like that!" said she angrily. "But wait a little. Wait till he tells his people at home—wait till he tells his big brother—then you'll catch it!"

But this threat was not of the least avail.

"No no; I'm not thinking he will do that," Johnny said coolly. "He will not say a word to any one, not to any one at ahl, for fear of a strapping. He will not say a word. But he will be in less of a hurry to throw stons at me again!"

And then once more she had to give up the task of

reforming this reprobate as something quite hopeless; for Johnny had always some argument with which to meet her remonstrances. Nor was it any use to warn him that sooner or later he would receive a sound thrashing, for he had been let off too many times before; besides, in this strange world in which he found himself, surrounded on all hands by malevolent creatures, armed with fists and claws and hoofs and stings to injure him, he had so much to do in fighting these enemies and in getting his revenge (either on them or their congeners) that he soon forgot warnings. He was too busy, in fact—for he was determined not to have the worst of this incessant conflict; and where he could not win to victory by strength, he could fall back upon a very respectable fund of patience and astuteness and malicious cunning.

One evening Flora and Alison were strolling backward and forward through the garden, arm-in-arm. They were bare-headed, for the air was warm and still; Flora carried a scarlet double poppy hanging from her hand, Alison had a white rose at her neck. And no doubt any passer-by would have thought that these two pensive maidens were merely drinking in the balmy air, and idly regarding the various bright beds of pansies and snapdragon and sweet-william; whereas the truth was that Miss Flora was entertaining her companion with sundry experiences of her own, especially as regards young men, and their insensate folly and simplicity as she had seen these exhibited on diverse occasions. It was hardly an edifying conversation; for Miss Flora frankly confessed that nothing delighted her so much as to see two young men at daggers drawn on her account, and trying darkly to conceal the same. Her own cantrips and coquetries were lightly glossed over; but Alison could guess a good deal: she knew where lay the origin of these bitter underhand bickerings and strivings and animosities. The

demure smile that was in this handsome damsel's eyes was a sufficient admission.

"Hullo!" she exclaimed, happening to look along the road, "there's Ludovick come back." And then, as a sudden after-thought, "Well, I'm going round to Mrs. MacInnes's, to beg for some sprays of her copper beech for the dining-room fireplace. I wonder why some of the old people call it the 'bloody' beech: some legend, most likely. I suppose I can go round without getting my bonnet."

So she went down to the gate just in time to meet Ludovick there; shook hands with him, and asked him about certain common friends of theirs in Edinburgh; and then went carelessly on her way. By this means she left him to find Alison alone in the garden.

"I have something to tell you, Ludovick," said she rather shyly, when he came up.

"And I can see by your face that it isn't very bad news," said he. "Let's sit down on this seat, and you can tell me all about it. Well?"

"I have heard from Agnes," she said, when they were seated together, just outside the house.

"Yes, and she hasn't cried 'Bogey' at all?" he said cheerfully.

"No——"

"Didn't I tell you?" he broke in. "Wasn't I sure of it? Well, now, there is some encouragement for you: that will give you heart of grace for a beginning at least——"

"Yes, but, Ludovick," Alison said, with a kind of rueful smile, "it's all very well for you to make light of difficulties—for you simply won't look at them. Now, in this letter it is rather odd that Agnes doesn't say a single word about your being a Catholic——"

"Why should she?" he asked. "Why should anybody?"

"But I particularly mentioned it," was her reply, for she had been pondering over this matter, "and told her all my perplexities, and what I feared. Well, she doesn't say a word in answer to all that! She says a lot of very nice things about you, and is very kind to me; but there's not a word with regard to the very question I wrote to her about!"

"Because that is unnecessary," said he, "and she knew it."

Alison shook her head doubtfully.

"I am not so sure," she said. "However, there is one thing I must tell you. Aunt Gilchrist knows all about it now, and she approves——"

"Of course she does!" said this hapless young man, who did not dream how soon his buoyant confidence and dearest hopes were all to be dashed to the ground. "I could have foretold that. Your aunt Gilchrist and I are excellent friends, and quite understand each other. We had a talk last summer—about you. But what led her to say anything definite?"

"There's a Mrs. Cowan," Alison made answer, rather hanging down her head the while. "I—I told you—about that young man——"

"Oh yes, I remember," said he carelessly; "the fellow with the long-tailed coat and the flabby trousers."

"And—and Mrs. Cowan wrote to Aunt Gilchrist about him—and about me——"

"Really! That was very kind—very considerate," he said—for he did not seem to concern himself much about this rival. "She wanted to secure the prize for her hopeful son. Very natural. Well?"

"Well, Aunt Gilchrist was very angry—besides, she happened to hurt her foot just as she got the letter, and that made her all the more irritable; and before sending her answer she questioned me about—about you,

Ludovick—and she approved at once, and without hardly saying anything about your being a Catholic——"

"There!" said he. "There is another one!"

But Alison was not so confident as he was.

"I am afraid that answer of Aunt Gilchrist's will make mischief, Ludovick," she said absently.

"Oh, nonsense!" he cried. "Why, Alison, you mustn't be afraid of those people. You're in Lochaber now—you're not in Kirk o' Shields! I believe they cow you when they get you among them—you that have courage and nerve for anything when your own natural self gets the upper hand. Here you are not frightened of anything—I believe you'd face Johnny's big Duffle himself if you saw him coming along the road. And now you have got an answer from the only two people you have consulted; and you see they don't anticipate any terrible opposition. Of course," said he presently, with more of gentleness in his voice, "I quite understand your hesitation. You find yourself at present very much alone. You don't know what may happen; and you have been brought up to put weight on the opinion of all those people. But you see, Alison, if once the definite step were taken, you wouldn't be any longer alone; you would have given me the right to be your protector; and I can answer for it that I will take care you shan't be harmed or interfered with by anybody's opinion or opposition. You are alone now. You wouldn't be alone then!"

She looked up to him, as if already appealing for that guidance and protection, and she said—

"Then what would you have me do now?"

"Well," said he, "I don't think you could do better, in order to be rid of all these anxieties, than write to your father at once, and tell him frankly the whole position of affairs."

Her eyes widened with a sudden apprehension; then she said gravely—

"I would rather wait—until I could speak to him. Writing seems so cold a thing."

He said with a smile—

"Won't you have lost a great part of your courage, Alison, when once you are back in Kirk o' Shields? And in the mean time, why should you suffer anxiety, when the way is clear?"

The way was not so clear as he imagined. At this moment Flora made her appearance, approaching the gate with a few branches of the "bloody beech" in her hand. As she came up through the garden she said—

"Now you may scold me, Alison, as much as you please. I met the postman this afternoon, and got the letters from him, and the one for you I put in my pocket, and forgot all about it until a couple of minutes ago. Here it is. I'm very sorry!"

"I'm sure it doesn't matter," Alison said, as she took the letter from Flora, who straightway went into the house with her leaves.

And then Alison glanced at the envelope, and started slightly.

"This is from Agnes," said she to her companion. "You won't mind my opening it?—perhaps she has something further to say."

As for him, he was anticipating no evil, and it did not occur to him to watch the expression of her face as she ran her frightened eyes over these brief pages, that were written in a tremulous and uncertain hand. Her lips grew very pale, but she said nothing. Even when she had finished she did not stir; she seemed scarcely to breathe; she held the letter in her clinched fingers, and blankly gazed at it.

"DEAREST ALISON," her sister wrote, in that trembling hand, "I hardly know how to tell you. Something dread-

ful has happened. Mrs. Cowan has been here—and saw father. Then he came to me, and questioned me—only a few words—but I have never seen him look like that before—oh, it was terrible! and his eyes were like coals, and he spoke to me as he never spoke before. And what he said was that I was to sit down and write to you that unless you were back home within four and twenty hours after getting this letter, the door of the house would be shut on you for ever. Dear Alison, my heart is just like to break; but what can I do but send you the message? Come home quick, quick, and go to him yourself. He said he was glad mother was dead—but oh! it was his look that was so terrible. Come home quick, Alison, for I don't know what to do.

"AGNES."

Ludovick Macdonell was idly gazing across the loch, and at the darkening opposite hills, behind which the sun had already sank, while he waited for his companion to finish her letter. But when he heard her utter a brief sigh he turned quickly, and it was well that he did so, for he found she had grown deathly white, and in another moment she would have fallen senseless from the seat.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN EXTREMITY.

THE evening after-glow had deepened and richened in its marvellous intensity of light and colour; for while in the shining skies overhead there hung masses of crimson cloud that were soft and ethereal in their reposeful majesty and calm, down here the wide waters of the loch were all of a lambent ruddy-purple, broken everywhere by multitudinous swift-glancing ripples — black shuttles they seemed to be, darting transversely hither and thither through the rose-violet fire. And yet, despite this final glory in sky and sea, a sombre darkness was gathering over the western hills behind which the sun had gone down; and the profound and hushed silence prevailing everywhere seemed to tell of the coming of the night.

And it was under these still shining heavens and by the side of these lustrous waters that Alison and her lover walked slowly to and fro, he earnestly pleading with her, she almost too distraught to make answer; for the meaning of that letter was plain enough. The end had come.

"Ludovick," she said at length, between her only half-concealed sobs, "since ever we two met it has been one good-bye after another, but this is the last; and it is better it should be the last. It was all a mistake from the beginning. And I have been the one to blame, I know that. I should have discovered you were a Catholic; and then—and then, after knowing it, I should never have come back to Fort William. I thought it would be

easy enough. I thought we could be friends. But I am the one that is to blame; and I—I shall have to bear the punishment; for you are a man—you will forget it all in a year or two; but I am a woman—it will go with me through life."

"Come, don't talk like that, Alison!" he said to her, but very gently. "Things are not so bad as that. But they are bad enough; and I will tell you what it is I fear. You see, when you are left to your own judgment, when you are removed from certain influences, when you are here in the Highlands, in short, I do believe you are the most clear-sighted, courageous, self-possessed woman I have ever met with; but as soon as you go back to that town you surrender yourself and become quite a different being. You are afraid of the congregation; the elders' wives are all-important to you; why, you even seem to owe some mysterious duty to those ancient Blairs of Moss-end—who were no doubt worthy old gentlemen in their own day, walking according to their lights, just as you should do now, without being tyrannized over by them or their ghosts. Here in the Highlands you are bright, and merry, and talkative, and happy as the day is long; there you are a timorous frightened creature, who will hardly hold out your hand when a friend calls on you. I don't know whether it's the moral atmosphere of the place, or the physical, or both; but what I fear is that when you go back there you will lose your self-possession, you will let them do with you what they like, and then what will be the end? Why, that you and I may never see each other again in this world."

"Ludovick, what else is there?" she said piteously.

"I wish you had never gone back to that town!" he exclaimed almost angrily. "Why was I such a fool as to let you go back last summer?—why am I such a fool as to let you go back now?"

"Ludovick," said she, with an accent of reproach "would you have the door of my father's house shut against me for ever?"

"Well, I know what will happen," he said. "I know it to a certainty. I tell you, Alison, I do believe I understand you better than you understand yourself. I have reasoned it all out many a time—after what Flora told me. Many a night I used to lie awake in the dahabeeah we had on the Nile—a fine place for thinking it was, the hammock slung in the small cabin, and hardly a whisper heard of the water outside—and I went over again and again all Flora's explanations, and I got to see pretty well how you were situated. And haven't I told you before now that you are a far more human kind of being in the Highlands—that you show all your frank qualities of mind and disposition—that, in fact, you are the Alison that all of us up here have got to be so fond of? But what are you in Kirk o' Shields!—the Minister's daughter, a cowed creature, superstitious, timorous, with all your natural gaiety crushed out of you by the fear of the congregation. Oh, upon my soul it's too bad!" he exclaimed, in his hot impetuosity. "It's too bad! You—who have the spirit of a lark—who are naturally as light-hearted as a bird—and—and merry—for you to be chained down—to be shut up in that dungeon—that hole—it's too bad!"

But this indignant and incoherent protest brought no light of direction with it.

"It isn't every one who can choose," she made answer rather sadly. "And it's all very well for you, Ludovick, to make light of duties; but the duties are there; and it would be better not to live at all than to live with a conscience that would always be reproaching you."

"Oh, now you're beginning to talk like Kirk o' Shields!" he said roughly. "I wish you would talk like our Alison—like the Alison we know."

"And what would you have me say, Ludovick—except good-bye?"

The question was a simple one, not to say a pathetic one; but it received no answer. His soul within him was chafing against these unseen bonds, that were all the more vexatious that they were impalpable and not to be seized and broken asunder. He walked on in silence by her side, his brows knit, his eyes fixed mostly on the ground. As for her, she was regarding the now fading glories of sea and sky with the knowledge that, here at least, she should never look on them again. She was taking farewell of them, as it were. She was Princess Deirdri, gazing for the last time on the land where she had been beloved and happy.

"Alison," said he presently, "have you definitely resolved to go back to Kirk o' Shields to-morrow?"

"What else can I do, Ludovick?" she said. "I cannot have my father's house shut against me. I must go back."

"Then, as I say, I know what will happen. Here and now you might make a resolution—I might even claim a promise from you; but there you would soon be under the power of old influences and associations; and you would let yourself be led. Do you forget what your aunt Gilchrist told me?—that you were very nearly being induced to marry that wretched creature of a divinity student——"

"But that was different, Ludovick!" she exclaimed, in eager self-justification. "I—I thought it was all over between you and me—I knew it was—and I didn't seem to care what happened——"

"And won't the same thing occur again?" he said. "The moment you go back you will be forbidden to have any communication with such a frightful monster as a Catholic—and the years will go by—and some fine day I

shall hear of my Alison being married to that stickit minister, as your aunt calls him. That will be a pleasant thing for me to hear."

"I don't think you ever will, Ludovick," she said, in rather a low voice.

"You don't think so now, because you are here, in Lochaber; but you may think differently when two or three years of living in Kirk o' Shields, among all those people, have changed you. And I wonder what Mrs. James Cowan—that is the name you will be wearing then, isn't it?—I wonder what Mrs. James Cowan will be saying to herself when she sees in the newspaper that the Ludovick she used to know in other days has got married too? I wonder what she will be thinking then? or will she think at all? I suppose she will have forgotten there ever was such a person, or that she was ever in such a place as Lochaber."

"You are not—not very kind to me to-night, Ludovick," she said, in tremulous tones, "and—and I am going away to-morrow."

He suddenly stopped (a gray twilight lay over the land now; and these two figures were quite dark against the wan lilac of the water), and he took both her hands in his, and held them tight.

"Sweetheart," said he, in a very different voice, "don't heed what I have been saying! The very idea of losing you altogether maddens me! I can't bear your going away—when I think of what may happen, with distance and perhaps years separating us; and when I see you standing here so close to me, and not very happy, I suppose—you, my own Alison, that should be mine always—and yet you are going away from me—well, I was too impatient—and you will forgive me!"

These appealing sentences had to cease; some belated traveller was coming along the road; and they had to

resume their walk in silence until he had passed. Then he said—

"You see, Alison, what I was thinking of is this: it is so easy for two young people to say they will never marry if they cannot marry each other; and they make promises and vows; and they separate, quite sure of each other's constancy. It's the commonest thing in the world. But circumstances are strong; you can never tell what may happen in absence; misrepresentations may be made, or false rumours get about; and friends and relatives may be urgent until—well, until one of the lovers forgets what she has promised, or is perhaps piqued by false reports into marrying some one else; and the other one—well, he is miserable enough for a time, but he gives up the dreams of his youth, and by-and-by consoles himself as best he may. Oh, I assure you," he continued (and now the whole twilit world was to themselves, and there was not a sound but the monotonous plash of the ripples along the sea-weed), "I could preach to you for an hour on that subject; for I've been preached to, again and again, and in very similar circumstances. I should like to tell you the story, Alison: perhaps you would care to know what the two sweethearts did?"

He paused in his walk, while she stopped too. He was regarding her curiously; her eyes were downcast; probably she was listening with sadly wandering thoughts; for how could a story interest one who was about to say good-bye for ever to the man she loved?

"They were both friends of mine," Ludovick continued cheerfully enough, though he never for a moment removed his eyes from her downcast face. "One of them indeed was my chum—Ogilvie his name. Well, at that time his regiment was stationed at Fort George; and it was at the Northern Counties Ball at Inverness that he met the youngest of the Ramsay girls—the Ramsays of Kilcoultrie

—Lilias I think her name was, but I've often heard her called the Flower of Strath-glas—and the two of them took such a fancy for each other that they were like Romeo and Juliet over again. He was quite daft about her—managed to get invitations to any country-house she might be stopping at—and worried his colonel's life out for leave. But the Ramsay family wouldn't hear of it; they are very wealthy—and besides she had become quite a famous beauty; and young Ogilvie had little beyond his pay. At last they forbade him to have any communication with her; and as they found that wasn't enough; they resolved upon sending the Flower of Strath-glas to the south of Ireland, where she had some relatives, to live there for an indefinite time. Ogilvie came to me. I got preached at, as I tell you. He was quite pathetic, and magnified all the dangers of the threatened separation; but I don't think I would have intermeddled on his account, if the young lady had not come and appealed to me as well. That finished me; I couldn't refuse; and when I found out what pluck she had, I became party to a little scheme, though the Ramsay family have no idea until this day that I had anything to do with it. The short and the long of it was that one fine morning these two young people, without saying by your leave or with your leave, got quietly married in Inverness—and no one knew anything about it for nearly three years thereafter."

"They got married?" Alison repeated, rather faintly—and she raised her face with asking eyes.

He was regarding her intently: her raised eyes were seeking, and fearing, to read the meaning in his.

"But that is not what I would have done," he said slowly. "I would have no secret marriage—not a bit. If I were in a position like that—and if the girl had courage enough—and if there was a chance of our being

separated for ever—then I might ask her to go through a form of civil marriage before the sheriff, because that could be done instantly, and there could be no chance of interference; but immediately it was over, I should want everybody to know who cared to know. I should want to be able to say, 'She is mine; you can't touch her now; she may go back to her own home, if she thinks her duty lies that way, but she is mine: absence and threats and persuasions are of no avail now; sooner or later we shall come together again; in the mean time we will wait, if there is reason for waiting, but you cannot divide us the one from the other any more.' Alison," he said, "what is your answer?"

She uttered a little cry, and buried her face in his bosom.

"Oh, Ludovick!" was all she could say.

"Understand," he continued, "I don't want to drag you into any secret marriage—any hole-and-corner marriage. I want everybody to know who has the right to know. I should like you to go right back now and let me tell Hugh and Flora, and Mr. and Mrs. Munro, and your aunt Gilchrist what we are going to do to-morrow morning; and after we have been to the sheriff's chambers, then you are free to go back to Kirk o' Shields. Isn't it simple, Alison? You are mine—but I want you to be safely mine, that is all!"

She withdrew herself from his embrace.

"It is late," she said; "they will be wondering."

Indeed she hardly seemed to know what she said; and when they turned to walk back to the outskirts of the little town—where the orange lamps were beginning to appear in the dusk—he led her by the hand, as if she had been a child, while he was persuading her that this step he was urging her to take was reasonable and natural and justifiable. She listened in silence. Once only, in the

midst of his earnest, his almost passionate, pleadings, she stopped him.

"Ludovick," she said "if—if I hesitate—don't think it is because I do not love you, or am afraid to trust you. I have trusted you; I have given myself to you; what more can I do than that? But—but this is so sudden."

And then again he said, very gently—

"I know, dearest Alison, that it is a very startling thing, but the circumstances are imperative. You are going away to-morrow morning: it is a question of hours. But if you are so alarmed, wouldn't you ask the advice of your friends? Wouldn't you ask Flora and Hugh and Mrs. Gilchrist? They can only wish for your good. I don't quite say you should ask the Doctor and Mrs. Munro; for, you see, you are staying in their house, and they are in a way responsible for you to your father; but your aunt Gilchrist—she knows how you are situated, she is exceedingly fond of you: why not ask her? In any case you would have to give her some reason for your going away so suddenly; why not give her the true reason, and tell her what I want you to do?"

"Yes—yes—perhaps," Alison answered absently: her thoughts were flying far afield.

But as it chanced it was Hugh and Flora who were first called into counsel. As Ludovick and his companion were getting back to the small garden-enclosed villas they perceived two dark figures coming along the road towards them, and as these drew near they could be made out to be Alison's cousins.

"Why, where have you two been?" Flora cried, with good-humoured reproach.

"I will apologize to your mother the moment we get back," Ludovick said at once, "for having kept Alison out so late; but the fact is something serious has happened, and we had many matters to talk over that

could only be spoken of between ourselves. She is going back to Kirk o' Shields to-morrow morning."

"What! Alison?" cried Flora; and instinctively the girl seized hold of her cousin's hand, as if she would detain her there and then, and prevent any such spiriting away. "What do you mean, Ludovick?"

"It is for Alison herself to say how much I am to tell you," he answered.

She hesitated only for a moment.

"Everything, Ludovick—everything," she said.

Well, thereupon Captain Ludovick told his two friends the whole story of their engagement (which was hardly news, perhaps), of Alison's hopes that her friends in Kirk o' Shields might perchance be brought to sanction the marriage, of the peremptory letter received that evening, and also of his daring proposal for the morrow morning; and he hinted that Alison was looking to them for some advice and assistance in the straits in which she found herself.

"Well, look here, Ludovick," Hugh said frankly, "I for one am dead against it. I can foresee nothing but trouble—for Alison first, and for both of you after. You would land yourself in for you don't know what. But in any case where is the use of talking? You couldn't get married in that hasty fashion if you tried. How could you get married at an hour or two's notice?"

"The simplest thing in the world," was the confident rejoinder. "My dear lad, I've been through it—as best man, that is; I know all about it. You get a lawyer to draw out a declaration; Alison and I sign it; you have two witnesses—you'll be one, Hugh, and the lawyer the other; then you take it along to the sheriff-substitute; he reads it over and signs it; you take the warrant along to the registrar, and the ceremony is complete. Simplest thing in the world!"

And then as they were going up through the garden to the open door of the house he told them the story he had told to Alison, in explanation of his knowledge of these particulars.

"But, Ludovick," said Flora, who had not yet expressed either approval or disapproval, "how did that marriage turn out in the end?"

"Why, excellently—excellently!" he said, with unnecessary eagerness. "The Ramsays saw it was no use crying over spilt milk; they made it up with the young people very soon after the truth became known; and I must say the old man behaved very handsomely. As for Major Ogilvie and his wife—well, I went with them as far as Suez last winter, when they were going to India, and I'm sure there wasn't a happier or merrier couple on board."

"Well, I don't know, Ludovick," Hugh said doubtfully, as they were going into the house; "but I for one wouldn't advise Alison to do anything of that kind."

"Anything of what kind!" Captain Ludovick protested. "This isn't a secret marriage at all! This is as open as the day!"

He could say nothing further at the moment, for they had reached the dining-room door, and Mrs. Munro came out to scold the two recusants (as well as she could scold anybody), and to inform them that they would have to sup by their two selves, as the rest of the family had declined to wait for them.

It was not supper that was in Alison's mind. She asked for her aunt Gilchrist. She was told that the old lady had gone to her own room. Thither, accordingly, Alison repaired—but slowly and thoughtfully, for she did not know how she was to acquaint her with what had happened.

And when she came to the door she paused there,

irresolute, that she might gain some composure; for her heart was full. Aunt Gilchrist had been more than kind to her. And now she was come to say good-bye; and she did not wish to appear ungrateful. There was something else that was bringing her near to tears; but she was trying to put that aside for the moment.

At last she summoned up courage, and tapped at the door.

"Come in!" called a cheerful voice; and then on entering she found her aunt seated by the little window-table, the gas lit, and an open desk beside her.

"Well, what does my bit lady want?" Aunt Gilchrist asked encouragingly enough, as she laid aside the document she had been reading. "I was just looking at your name, my dear, in that paper there."

The girl went forward, hesitating—not able to speak—and then she sank on to her knees, and buried her head in the old dame's lap, and burst into a passionate fit of crying.

"Oh, you've been so good to me, Aunt Gilchrist—you've been so good to me!" she sobbed. "And I'm going away to-morrow morning; and perhaps they'll never let me come to see you again!"

"Mercy on us, what in all the world is this now?" exclaimed Aunt Gilchrist, in a swift blaze of anger. "Going away? Who says that? Tell me who says that!"

But Alison could only sob and sob, and made no answer; and pity for the grief-stricken child before her quickly interfered with the old dame's wrath against those persons unknown. She put her hand on the soft brown hair.

"Ailie, my dear," said she, "what's all this now? Why, I've just been delighted this while back to see you so light-hearted and blithe and merry, and now all of a

sudden it's gone, and you're struck down, and crying like a bairn. What is it, my dear? There, now, get up and dry your eyes, and take that chair, and tell me the whole story. I warrant it's none o' your own wrong-doing; I'll be bound for that. But I know there's folk in this world just that contentious and cantankerous that they'll not let things go smoothly on. And to interfere with such an innocent creature as you! I say interfere; for unless faces tell lies, ye've been a very happy young madam since ye've been in Fort William this time. Oh, I'm not asking for secrets, never fear; but old as I am I can see what's as plain as a pikestaff to everybody else. Well, now, that's a dear! there's my lamb! you just draw your chair close up, and keep quiet and peaceful, and tell me the whole story."

But Alison could not so quickly recover her self-control; and so, as the simplest key to the whole situation, she took out the letter that had summoned her to the south, and without a word handed it to her aunt Gilchrist. And no sooner had the little old dame begun to read Agnes's trembling lines than it was quickly apparent she had forgotten those exhortations to peacefulness and calm which she had been impressing on her niece but a moment before. Her eyes began to burn; her teeth were set hard with indignation; and at last she dashed down the letter on the table with her clinched fist.

"It's *that woman*, Alison!" she exclaimed, with suppressed fury. "It's that woman that's at the bottom o't; and I declare to ye she'll never rest until I set my ten nails on her smirking, sniggering, simpering face! I wish I could see that great yellow hogshead o' a husband o' hers take a thick stick to her back; that would teach her to interfere in other folk's affairs. But I've not done wi' her yet—my word, I've not; and for your father to be led away by a cringing, mincing, scheming, double-faced,

wicked woman like that—oh, it would drive a saint wild! Has he no eyes? Does he no see that all her concern is to get you to marry that bit o' washed-out rag that they hope to make a minister o'?"

Alison shook her head.

"No, aunt, it—it isn't that has made my father threaten to shut the door on me. Can you remember—in the letter you sent to Mrs. Cowan — whether you happened to say that—that Ludovick was a Catholic?"

"Of course I did!" said Aunt Gilchrist, with a triumphant air; "of course I did! I thought I would give her a fright—her and her tallow-candle-faced son! Certainly I told her what *our* notions were as to your probable future, my dear; and I let her know pretty plainly that the probationer was *not* included!"

"Ah, that is it, then," Alison said sadly enough. "She has taken the letter to my father; and no doubt she made the most of Ludovick's being a Catholic. Well, it does not matter. He would have had to know sooner or later; and I suppose this is what would have been the end in any case."

"And so you are really going away back to-morrow morning, Alison?" the old lady demanded, with a curious look of interrogation.

"Yes; what else can I do?" the girl answered simply. "And I came to thank you, dear aunt, or to try to thank you, for all your goodness to me——"

"We'll say nothing about that," Aunt Gilchrist broke in without ceremony. "This is what I want to know—have ye put all this affair before Captain Ludovick?"

"Oh yes, indeed, aunt."

"And—and what does he say about it?" the old dame inquired, in an off-hand kind of fashion, but still regarding her niece.

Alison hesitated. What was the use of disclosing that

wild scheme, when it had already met with Hugh's distinct disapproval, and with Flora's hardly less significant silence? Yet Ludovick had appealed to her to include Aunt Gilchrist also among her counsellers; and so, briefly enough, and with downcast eyes, she told the little dame what it was that Ludovick Macdonell had proposed should be done on the very next morning.

And what a change came over Aunt Gilchrist's face during this recital! At first there was merely surprise; but when she fully understood what was in contemplation she became quite radiant and exultant.

"Well done!—well done!" she cried, with a kind of proud laugh. "There's a proper kind o' man! there's a fellow for ye! there's my brave laddie!—and so *that's* the answer he's sending back to they folk in Kirk o' Shields!" She laughed aloud in her delight. "I declare to ye, Alison, I could take three skips o'er the floor and back again, if it werena for that wee deevil Periphery that's waiting for me! I thought, now, he wouldna be for letting you slip through his fingers! My word, that's a good one! that's the way to carry the war into the enemy's camp. And you—what do you say? Is it to be 'hey the bonny breast-knots' before ye go away by the steamer? Are we to have a wedding sprung on us at a moment's notice? As sure as I'm alive, Alison Blair, if ye get married the morn's morning, I'll dance a reel wi' your good man in the evening, ay, if I die for it!"

Alison smiled a little, and blushed too, and her eyes were averted.

"You see, Aunt Gilchrist, it is not quite easy to say either yes or no, for it has all been so sudden, so unexpected. I have only spoken of it to Hugh and Flora. Hugh is greatly against it; he foresees nothing but trouble."

"Hugh? What's Hugh!" the impetuous small creature

exclaimed. "Hugh understands about music and poetry and things o' that kind: what does he know of the practical affairs o' this blessed world we are livin' in?"

"And I imagine Flora thinks the same way, Aunt Gilchrist," Alison said, looking up doubtfully.

"Flora! What right has that impertinent young minx to have an opinion at all? Tell her from me to mind her own business, and keep to her gallivanting with those young fellows she pretends to despise all the time!"

"And—and you, Aunt Gilchrist?" Alison said, with some hesitation.

"Come here!"

She took the girl in her arms, and drew down her head and kissed her very tenderly.

"Ailie, my dear, I've never had a child of my own, and ye've been like a daughter to me. There is nothing in the world I would not do for your welfare. And maybe I was a wee bit thing too hasty, because I was delighted with the spirit o' the lad; and—and I was glad to think o' they folk getting a slap on the cheek; but it's your own heart ye must consult, my lamb; ye must ask yourself what ye've the courage to face; for there may be trouble. But mind this—now mind this, Alison—if ever you are in trouble, ye'll never want for a friend and a warm welcome as long's I'm above the ground. Now go away and think it out for yourself—and ye're a wise kind of creature, too—and ye've got decision enough when ye like: think it out for yourself; ask yourself what ye have the courage to do; and then come and tell me—to-night, or as early the morn's morning as ye like."

"Very well, aunt," Alison said, and kissed her, and was about to leave the room, when the little old lady called to her again.

"And just remember this, my dear," Aunt Gilchrist said, in a much blither fashion, "that when I promised

ye a home and a warm welcome, I did not mean a Hydropathic. Not one bit! You and I will find for ourselves something snugger than a big hotel filled wi' lunatics drinking water. And if ye do get married the morn's morning, and if by-and-by ye would take up your naitural position in Oyre House, just you tell your Captain Ludovick that his bride will be provided for on all points, for whenever he asks me I'll come and be a mother-in-law to him for as many weeks together as he likes."

Meanwhile the whole house had been put in commotion by the news that Alison was going away by the next day's steamer; but it was now grown late; and there was not much time left for consideration as to what should happen on the morrow. When Alison went downstairs, she found that her two cousins and Ludovick had gone out into the garden; for there was a clear moonlight night shining all around—the pale and silvery radiance lighting up the flower-beds near at hand, the white road, the gray beach, the still bosom of the loch, and the far slopes and crags of the opposite hills that rose into an almost cloudless sky. She joined that little group of black figures; but she had no definite message for them. Aunt Gilchrist had left the matter to her own decision; and she would take the intervening time to think over it. So Hugh and Flora discreetly bade Ludovick good night, and slipped into the house, leaving the two lovers to their own farewells. These were not protracted; for Ludovick did not wish to weaken what he had said by any needless repetition; soon Alison had rejoined her cousins, and in a little while thereafter the whole household had retired to rest.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FOR GOOD OR ILL.

LONG into the night, and on towards the morning, she sat at the open window of her room, with this ghostly, silent, moonlit world all around her, not even the whisper of a ripple along the sea-weed margin of the beach, not a breath of wind stirring the wan gray surface of the loch. A kind of phantom world it was, and she the only living thing in it. And as she looked absently and wistfully at the sleeping water, at the silvered crags and slopes that rose afar into the starry skies, at the darker pine-woods in the north, and the still more distant and visionary hills beyond Loch Eil, the farewell song of the Princess Deirdri would come again and again into her head, like some recurrent, ineffably sad refrain:

"*Glen Etive, O Glen Etive,*
There was raised my earliest home,
Beautiful were its woods on rising,
When the sun fell on Glen Etive!
* * * *
Glenorchy, O Glenorchy,
The straight glen of smooth ridges;
No man of his age was so joyful
As my Naos in Glenorchy!
* * * *
Glenmassan, O Glenmassan,
Long its grass, and fair its woodland glades;
All to ourselves was the place of our repose
On grassy Invermassan!"

For she was trying to put away from her the momentous decision she would have to face before the morning. It

was her leave-taking—this time a final leave-taking—on which her mind was fixed. She had been living in a fool's paradise; Ludovick had warned her of it at Bridge of Roy. And here was the sharp and sudden awakening; and a swift end to all her pleasant day-dreams, and to that joyousness that for the time being she had deemed all-sufficient.

But there were two or three other chance words of Ludovick Macdonell's that haunted her in a curious way. Her imagination would insist on carrying her forward a few years and showing her a certain thing happening to her. She did not picture herself as Mrs. James Cowan. If her friends pleaded with her, if it was put before her as her bounden duty—well, that might or might not be: it was hardly a matter of concern to her. She might be Mrs. James Cowan, or she might still be Alison Blair: she only knew that the woman she looked forward to and beheld in these coming years was a solitary woman, with hardly anything to hope for, and anxious only to secure forgetfulness of what was bygone by incessant attention to the trivial duties surrounding her. One morning—this is what Alison saw, regarding herself as another person almost—she is in Kirk o' Shields, and busy as usual with her household cares, when a newspaper arrives. It is addressed to her by some friend in the North; she opens it; there is a mark that attracts her attention—then her startled eyes read the brief announcement of the marriage of Captain Ludovick Macdonell, of Oyre House, Lochaber, to Miss So-and-so, daughter of So-and-so. "And he was once my Ludovick," that solitary woman is saying to herself, as the newspaper drops from her hand; and her memory flies swiftly back to the time when every hour was a delight to her, when kind friends were around her, and the days shining and clear, and her lover by her side, waiting for a smile and look, in the far solitudes of

Lochaber. And perhaps that Alison, grown callous and indifferent with added years, might dismiss the announcement of Ludovick's marriage with merely a bit of a sigh; but this Alison—here at this window, and with the knowledge that her departure was now but a question of hours—had not so schooled herself. This Alison, with her arms on the sill, and her head bent down on them, was sobbing and sobbing as if her heart would break. The other Alison might say, sadly enough, "He was once my Ludovick." This Alison kept repeating to herself, "He is my Ludovick; and to-morrow I may be looking into his eyes for the last time."

Yet ever and anon the bewildering alternative—that she should go through a hasty and informal marriage ceremony just before stepping on board the steamer—would reassert itself, and press for a decisive yes or no. Guidance she had none. Even her aunt Gilchrist, who at first had been captivated by the mere audacity of the proposal, had grown doubtful. On the one hand was the girl's own natural dread of so sudden and serious an undertaking, on the other were her lover's eager and impetuous representations. And then, while her heart swayed this way and that, now shrinking back in fear, now grown bold through very desperation, there would come before her once more that vision of the solitary, sad-eyed woman living in Kirk o' Shields—and the newspaper with its laconic announcement—and her knowledge that now she was wholly cast aside and severed and forgotten. It was Ludovick himself who had told her that such was the way of the world. Lovers swore vows of eternal constancy when they were about to part; but absence, the persuasions of friends, perhaps false reports—all these were powerful solvents. She knew now what she had to expect when she went back to Kirk o' Shields: no more illusion was possible on that point. Just as likely as not,

she would be sternly forbidden to hold any, even the slightest, further communication with this dangerous person who had almost drawn her away from her allegiance to the true Church. And night and day they would be pointing out to her the iniquity of one in her position thinking of marrying a Roman Catholic.

The silence of this sleeping world brought her no counsel; the ineffable beauty of the silvered night had no message for her, unless it were to increase her sadness at the thought of the morrow's farewell. That unspeakable sadness followed her even into the land of dreams; for when at length, worn out by these conflicting anxieties, she flung herself, half undressed, upon the bed, and eventually fell into a troubled and uncertain slumber, behold! she was once more the Princess Deirdri, sailing away from the shores where she had been joyous and beloved. There was a sound of lamentation; her friends were weeping around her; she could see the pleasant garden-land slowly receding from sight, and the dark mountains gradually hemming it in. But what was the song of mourning?—it was no longer a farewell to Glen Etive and Glenorchy and Glenmassan—it was "Lochaber no more! Lochaber no more!" that the very winds and the waves were sighing and calling as the boat sped away to the South. And then still stranger things began to happen. For surely this is no more the Princess Deirdri—this solitary, pale-faced woman, clothed in black, who stands all alone in a pew in the church, with the rest of the congregation pointing at her and murmuring. Then some one reads aloud—and the sound of the reading goes echoing through the silent church—"*And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues. For her sins have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities. Reward her even as she re-*

warded you, and double unto her double according to her works: in the cup which she hath filled, fill to her double. How much she hath glorified herself, and lived deliciously, so much torment and sorrow give her: for she saith in her heart, I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow. Therefore shall her plagues come in one day, death, and mourning, and famine; and she shall be utterly burned with fire: for strong is the Lord God who judgeth her." She stands unmoved, and white of face; no one comes near her; the people begin to leave—turning and pointing towards her as they go, and murmuring among themselves—until she is absolutely alone in the empty building. Darker it grows and darker. The walls seem to come closer together: why, this is a prison—a dungeon—and she is lost for ever to the outer world. And yet she is unmoved; she is like a statue; no prayer rises to her lips, no tears come to her eyes; here in the darkness she remains unheeding; the life seems to have gone from her; she is as stone; she makes no appeal to God or man. And then—but she knows not how long thereafter—a sound strikes her ear—a sound as of distant bells—and a wild desire possesses her to learn what is going on in the world without. In the wall of the dungeon there is a small grating; she climbs up to it; eagerly she clasps two of the iron bars—and lo! a fair and sunlit landscape, with a white beach sloping down to the sea, and pleasant gardens, and dappled and far-receding hills. Breathless she holds on to the bars; for there is a wedding procession coming along—the bride all in white—the bridegroom gay and smiling—the bridesmaids bearing white flowers. Nearer they come—now they are passing by—and in vain, in vain she strives to make herself heard. "Ludovick! Ludovick!—have you no word for me?" she calls to him in her extremity of anguish; but he cannot hear. "Ludovick! Ludovick!—have you quite forgotten?" she would call to him again;

but her voice cannot reach him; the wedding-party has passed by; her grasp relaxes; and with a wild cry of despair she falls backward from the light, and knows no more.

It was that despairing cry that awoke her; and when she came into the real world again, behold! the new day was here—the new day that was to see her a bride, or a broken-hearted fugitive and exile. Quickly she went to the window again—to assure herself that she was in no black dungeon, forsaken and alone, with the wedding-party going on in its joyful procession, leaving her unheeded in the dark. And if there was anything that could bring peace to her troubled soul, surely it was this tranquil dawn that was now declaring itself over land and sea. Soft and shadowy it was as yet, for the skies were veiled by a network of cloud; and strangely still it was—the loch a dead calm, save where the smooth olive-green reflections of the opposite hills were broken by some wandering puff of wind into a shivering silver-gray. There was no blaze of morning splendour in this prevailing quietude; the only shaft of sunlight that came into this mysterious half-darkened world caught a solitary distant peak—a shoulder of rose-hued granite that shone clear and wonderful above the shadowed mountains of Ardgour.

Suddenly into this silence and solitude there stepped an apparition—at least so her frightened eyes at first imagined; but the next instant she had recognized the well-known figure of Ludovick Macdonell, who was coming idly along the road, but with his eyes fixed on the Doctor's house. And the moment he caught sight of her she could see how his face lit up. He waved his hand. She forgot that she was but partly dressed; again and again she returned his salutation—for it seemed so reassuring to have him near her, after those black terrors of the night. But he lingered there, in front of the small garden: did he

expect her to go down to him? Then swiftly she retreated from the window—dressed herself in a kind of way—thrust her bare feet into slippers—drew a shawl round her head—and presently, with stealthy foot-fall, was making her way down the stairs and through the sleeping house. The heavy lock made something of a noise, but she did not heed that now; Ludovick was there, expecting her. And then the next moment she found herself in the garden—she rosy-red, and yet with joy and welcome in her eyes, he hastening to her with a look as glad as her own.

"What have you to say to me, Alison?—is it to be yes?"

He had not to wait for an answer—it was written in her upturned face: he caught her to him, and pushed back the shawl from her forehead, and kissed her again and again.

"So you are going to be brave!" he said to her.

She hid her burning face in his bosom, and murmured—

"Ludovick, I am yours—yours—yours! Tell me what is right."

"But you are all trembling!" he exclaimed.

"I have been so frightened," she said. "There was a terrible dream—I thought I was in a dungeon—and there was one small window—and I looked through it and saw you—you were going away to be married——"

"And there's a true dream, anyway!" he said gaily. "Indeed I am going to be married, as soon as ever this blessed town of Fort William wakes up!"

"But why are you here already?" she asked; and she disengaged herself a little, so that they could walk up and down the small gravelled pathways between the beds of flowers, though still his arm was interlinked with hers. "What made you think of coming so early, Ludovick?"

"Oh, well," he said evasively, "I have just been strolling about."

"Ludovick," she protested, "do you mean that you have never been to bed at all?"

"It was hardly worth while," he said; and then he added, "Well, to tell you the truth, I was determined to have the earliest possible glimpse of you, and I knew you would come to the window some time. And really it was very pleasant. There has been hardly any darkness at all; the moonlight seemed to melt into the first light of the morning. I have been walking up and down in front of the gardens, and wondering whether the good people would be awfully angry if I went in and made up a bouquet of all the prettiest flowers, for the bride to carry in her hand."

"Were you so sure, Ludovick?" she said slowly, with downcast eyes.

"I was nearly sure."

She was silent for a second or two; then she said—but perhaps merely to hide her embarrassment—"How delicious the morning air is! Don't you think the flowers smell more sweetly before the sun gets at them? That is why I like to sleep with the window open; you can almost tell when the morning begins by the scent of the flowers coming in, and the birds beginning to chirp. I mean when I am living here," she said, rather sadly. "We have neither birds nor flowers in Kirk o' Shields."

"I suppose not," he said lightly—for he would not allow her to fall into any despondent mood on her wedding-morning. "But you are not going to live always in Kirk o' Shields. By the way, Alison," he said, in a sort of incidental fashion, "don't you think Oyre House looks very bare outside? I can't see why the gardener shouldn't get some flowering plants trained up the walls. I suppose you don't know whether honeysuckle or a tree-fuchsia would grow most quickly?"

"No, Ludovick, I'm sure I don't know," she said.

"The tree-fuchsia is certainly a beautiful thing," he continued, as they were idly and happily walking together, with interlinked arms, between those beds of blossoms, "when you can get it to grow properly. I have seen the whole side of a house covered with it—and the rich crimson bells go so well with the dark-green leaves. But the honeysuckle has the great advantage of scent. Which would you like to have round your window?"

"I?" she said, looking up at this abrupt question.

"Yes; I was just thinking," he said, "that I must try and do something to make Oyre look less forlorn; and I was wondering whether honeysuckle or fuchsias would be best."

"I should think most people would say honeysuckle," Alison made answer modestly; and then she said, "Now I must go in, Ludovick."

"No, not yet," he pleaded. "We have got the whole world to ourselves; there is no one thinking of stirring yet. I want you to tell me——" (For a moment he could not say what he wanted her to tell him; then he hit upon an excuse for delaying her.) "I want you to tell me what are your favourite flowers for planting out—beds like these, you see—tell me your favourite colours in flowers. You know, I don't think our man at Oyre has much taste—or perhaps it's direction he wants; my father and myself never think of interfering. Aren't you very fond of white moss-roses, Alison? I fancy they are not so common as they used to be, but we've got some bushes—oh yes, we've got some——"

"But I must go in, Ludovick! The fact is," she said, by way of laughing excuse, "the pebbles are hurting my feet—my slippers are so thin."

"Then come and stand on the doorstep," said he.

"But the servants will be about directly."

"Oh no, not at all. You have no idea how early it is

yet. Why, don't they say it is unlucky for lovers to meet on their wedding-day before the ceremony takes place? But then, you see, this isn't the wedding-day yet; this belongs to the night-time; it isn't day at all yet."

"It looks very like it, Ludovick," said she—for now there were stray shafts of sunlight striking on the higher crests of the opposite hills; and the yachts, that had been black as jet on the lilac-gray water, had now assumed their ordinary colour, their riding-lights being no longer distinguishable.

But despite the ever widening and brightening dawn, their leave-taking was a long and lingering one; and even when she had crept silently back to her own room she found he was still in the garden below, waiting for a last look or wave of the hand. So from a jug of flowers that stood on the small table beside her she took a rose and flung it to him, and kissed her finger-tips therewith; then she noiselessly shut the window, so that none in the house should hear. But she did not go back to bed again—there was too much to think of on this eventful morning.

Eventful, indeed! For no sooner had Alison's decision become known throughout the household than there was very considerable perturbation, not to say dismay—the elder Munroes having to be told, and the Doctor taking no pains to conceal his strong disapproval of so mad a project.

"Of course, you are quite old enough to judge for yourself, Alison," he said at the breakfast-table, when the servant had left the room, "and whatever you do will be quite legal and proper and correct; but I wish it had not been done from this house. We have had charge of you; your father will put the blame on us. And I for one cannot but think that so sudden and unconsidered a step may lead you into difficulties that you don't anticipate just now——"

"Duncan," his wife interposed, with a quiet smile, "surely you have not forgotten that you wanted me to do exactly the same thing when we were sweethearts?"

"There's a great difference," he said quickly and uneasily (for the father of a family does not like to have his romantic exploits of past days discussed at his own breakfast-table). "There's a great difference between a medical student without any certain prospects and the young laird of Oyre. Your family were quite right in their opposition—I may say that now; but where can the objection be to young Macdonell—what is the use of this hurry—what is the need of rushing into a hasty marriage——?"

"Duncan, my man," interposed Aunt Gilchrist, with but scant courtesy towards her brother, "ye're just havering. There's plenty of objection to young Macdonell among they folk in Kirk o' Shields; and if Alison goes back there without some such bond, I doubt whether she will ever see him again. Oh, I'm not responsible for the marriage—ye needna think that! I left it to herself—I left it to herself to say whether she had courage enough; but now that my bit lady has plucked up heart, do ye think I'm going to desert her? Not I! That's not like me, I tell 'ye! I'll stand by your side, Ailie, my dear; and I've got something to hint to your Captain Ludovick when I get a quiet word wi' him that'll no disappoint him, I reckon."

"Responsible or no responsible, Jane," said the Doctor, who seemed extremely uncomfortable about this affair, "you are taking act and part in it. And if it were an ordinary marriage, with proper notice given to everybody —but an irregular marriage——"

"Who says it is an irregular marriage?" demanded the little dame fiercely.

"They are going to be married by declaration and a

warrant of the sheriff-substitute—isn't that the proposal?" her brother said.

"What then?"

"But that *is* an irregular marriage," he insisted. "You will find it is so described in the Register."

Then Aunt Gilchrist laughed aloud in her scorn.

"Well, I declare!" she cried. "You do exactly as the law bids ye, and then the law itself tells ye it is irregular! Dod, man, Duncan, the lawyers maun be as daft as the doctors? Never mind, it's a marriage all the same; and if I'm to be at the wedding, I'm going to make myself as splendid as splendid can be, and Alison is coming to help me. And mind," said this imperious small person, as she was leading her niece away with her towards the door, "mind, as this is Alison's wedding-day, I'm not going to tramp backward and forward through the streets of Fort William. One of you, Hugh or Flora, you'll just step along to Mr. Carmichael, and say I want the waggonette sent here instanter, and the best pair o' horses in the stable. And if the man has a new suit o' livery, then on wi't at once! Come away, Alison; it's 'hey the bonny, ho the bonny, hey the bonny breast-knots!' and if ye've got no special finery for the wedding, see if I dinna make that up to ye before long—my word for it!"

And then again, when the little silver-haired, fresh-complexioned, bright-eyed woman had got her niece into her own room, she placed her at arm's-length before her and regarded her.

"They've no frightened ye, Ailie, my dear?"

"No, aunt, not in the least," Alison answered, quite simply.

"There's self-possession for ye! there's coolness!—there's my bit lady, that would face a regiment of cavalry when her mind's made up!" Aunt Gilchrist said, quite proudly. "That brother o' mine—don't you heed him,

Alison! They professional folk are just that timid about what the neighbours may say—they're a' living in glass houses—and they darna call their soul their own. But I thought he might frighten you."

"Well, aunt, this is how it is," Alison made answer. "I was very much troubled and very anxious at first, when I had to consider this—this proposal; but since have given my promise to Ludovick, it is of no consequence what any one may say—that is all."

"Since you've given your promise to Ludovick!—and when was that, I wonder?"

"This morning."

"This morning?"

"He was in the garden, aunt: I went down and saw him."

"They young folk! they young folk!" exclaimed Aunt Gilchrist, shaking her head mournfully; but she was not deeply displeased, and forthwith she went to her chest of drawers. "Well, Alison, I'll show ye the gown I'm going to wear; and if ye dinna say it's fit for a wedding, I'll call ye an ungrateful hussy."

Indeed, one might have thought it was Aunt Gilchrist herself who was about to be married, from the importance she assumed on this momentous morning. Of course there was a vast amount of hurrying, for the time was short; and yet in the midst of it all Aunt Gilchrist found an opportunity of calming the consciences of the elder Munroes, who were not a little alarmed by what was going on. She pointed out to them that they need not take any part whatsoever in this project, or be in any way responsible for it. What would happen, would happen after Alison had left their house. Her luggage was quite ready; let the lad John convey it down to the quay. Alison would say good-bye to the Doctor and Mrs. Munro at their own door; and if she chose to go through

a marriage ceremony with anybody—no matter whom—between that leave-taking and her departure by the steamer, why, that was her own affair, and they need not be supposed to know.

When Ludovick Macdonell came along, a few minutes thereafter, Flora's quick eye perceived that he did not wear his usual happy and careless audacity of manner; he seemed anxious about Alison somehow; he kept looking at her from time to time—though, to be sure, she appeared perfectly calm and self-possessed. He had no opportunity of speaking to her alone until they were going down through the garden to the waggonette, and even then it was only a word.

"Alison," he said, in a low voice, "am I asking too much?"

"No, Ludovick," she answered simply, and with frank eyes upturned to his.

And indeed there was nothing very exacting or imposing or terrifying about this brief ceremony. When they drove along to the solicitor's office, that functionary drew out a declaration of marriage from particulars he had already received from Captain Ludovick. The two contracting parties signed it—Alison's hand just trembling a little; then two witnesses had to sign, of whom Aunt Gilchrist boldly claimed to be the first. The bridegroom looked doubtfully at Hugh.

"Perhaps you would rather have nothing to do with it, Hugh?" said he.

"Oh, I'm going to stand by you, Ludovick," the younger man answered promptly, and he took the pen from Aunt Gilchrist and affixed his name.

The next part of the ceremony was equally brief and simple. Armed with this important document they drove along to the big brown-stone building in which the sheriff's court is held; there they sought out the sheriff-

substitute in his chambers. That worthy gentleman read over the declaration, signed it, and handed it back to Captain Ludovick, whom, by the way, he chanced to know slightly; and the next minute, when they were out in the open air again, Alison Blair was no longer Alison Blair, but Alison Macdonell, whatever the change might bring to her in the coming years.

"And is it really all over, Ludovick?" Flora cried, clinging on to Alison's arm, and looking a little bit awe-stricken as well as amused; for there was something uncanny about this swift, simple, informal transaction that had in a few minutes so completely transformed the lives of two human beings.

"Well," said the bridegroom doubtfully, as he pulled out his watch, "there might be time to go to the registrar and get a copy of the entry, if Alison would like to take it with her."

"Ludovick," said Hugh, who was a long-sighted lad, "the steamer has left Corpach."

"Then we'll run no risks," Macdonell said forthwith. "I'll go to the registrar when I come back in the afternoon—there is no hurry; and we can walk down to the quay now, unless Mrs. Gilchrist would rather drive."

"Oh, I'll go with ye. Periphery will let me go that short way," Aunt Gilchrist responded. "But the waggonette must wait for me. I'm not going home until I see my bit lady fairly started for the South."

And now, as the red-funnelled steamer slows in and stops, picks up its passengers and cargo, and sets forth on its voyage again—and when the last farewells have been waved to the proud little dame still standing at the end of the quay—behold! this is no sad-eyed Princess Deirdri sailing away southward, surrounded by weeping companions. The steeled composure of the morning is no longer necessary; the ordeal is over; now she is roseate

and happy and glad, as becomes a bride; and her cousins are as kind to her as they can be, though still they must tease her, and pay mock homage to her new estate. As for Captain Ludovick, he holds somewhat aloof; he is her husband, but does not press any claim on her attention; he allows the cousins to monopolize her; he appears indifferent—has he not the part of a husband to play? And is not the day a fair day and fit for a bride? The farther and farther south they go the skies get brighter and brighter, until here, close at hand, along the Appin shore, the sun is shining brilliantly on the sandy bays, on the rocks and crags half covered with ivy, and on the patches of dark-green fir and light-green ash; while away to the west, beyond the glassy plain of the sea, the far hills of Morven and Kingairloch have become of a faint rose-gray, with every scaur and corrie traced in shadows of purest azure. The throb of the paddle-wheels no longer bids her say a last farewell to Lochaber; kind friends are close and near to her; her lover—her husband—is but a yard or two away, an outstanding guard, as it were; and if there were no marriage-bells rung for her in Fort William, they are ringing now in her heart.

Ludovick comes forward.

"I say, Flora," he begins, "don't you think it is rather shabby of me to let Alison go back alone? Don't you think I should go on with her to Kirk o' Shields, to see her properly established?"

Alison looks up with a smile.

"Well, Ludovick," she says, "I don't know what may happen to me; perhaps something not very pleasant; but I know if you were to go with me, it would be twenty times worse. You talk about your discretion: why, you haven't got any at all! No, you must come back in this steamer with Hugh and Flora; I don't want any one to see you with me in the railway-train or anywhere else;

that would only make matters worse; and the truth is, Ludovick, perhaps—perhaps it may be better for me not to tell them what has happened—not for a little while, anyway, until I see a good chance."

"Then," said he, with an air of surprise, "do you want me to address my letters to Miss Alison Blair?—is that what I'm to call you?"

She looked down.

"Oh yes, why not?" she said.

"Oh, very well," he made answer, cheerfully enough; "it is of little consequence—only that would hardly be my way—I would tell them straight off, and let them make what they can of it. But just as you like. You see, Flora, I'm going to be a very obedient husband—at first. We'll have to lead her into slavery by gentle degrees. We'll have the rack and the thumb-screw produced later on."

None the less was it somewhat hard that the parting between husband and wife should take place in view of the onlookers in Oban railway-station. The train was pretty full; the best he could do for her was to get her a seat in a compartment in which an elderly lady and her three fair, large, and bright-haired daughters were already installed; therefore, what he had to say to her had to be spoken in parables.

"Remember, Alison"—these were his last words to her as the train was beginning to move out of the station—"remember, you will have to be at Oyre long before the honeysuckle has had time to grow up to the window."

Her eyes were fixed on his: she knew what he meant.

"I am not so sure about that, Ludovick," she answered; but she smiled bravely as long as he was in sight; and even kissed her hand to him again and again, despite the presence of these strangers; and when at last the train tore her away from him, and from the cousins who had been so kind to her, the tears that dimmed her eyes were not such tears of wretchedness after all.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SUMMONS.

One afternoon Flora was in the garden, busily engaged in snipping dead roses off the rose-bushes, when her brother Hugh came up from the shore. He had his yellow oil-skins over his arm, for it had been wet in the morning, though now the sun was hot on the flower-beds and the little gravelled paths.

"Look here," said he gloomily, "we must get rid of that fellow Johnny. He's growing worse and worse. He has been so encouraged, and so often forgiven, that he is now perfectly reckless, and the end of it will be his finding himself in Inverness jail. It's no use. He doesn't believe you when you threaten him."

"Why, what has he been doing now?" said Flora, looking up.

"There it is!" her brother exclaimed in disgust. "At once you are ready to laugh! That is the way you encourage him—and do you think he doesn't understand? Well, I don't see the fun of it myself. I don't want to be had up on a charge of manslaughter."

"What is it now?" she repeated.

"Oh, nothing!" he said, "only a little playful trick! When I went out in the lug-sail boat I put him up at the bow to keep a look-out—I thought it would just suit his laziness. Well, nothing happened till we were near to Corpach, when all of a sudden I heard a frightful yell right in front of me, and when I jammed down the helm

I found myself just shaving the edge of a canoe—some tourist, I suppose, out from Banavie. It was a most extraordinary thing that I did not cut the boat clean in two—and I think the man in it was so frightened he hadn't a single curse to fling after me. Then as for your friend John—oh, it was a splendid thing for him—he was grinning from ear to ear like a dead sunfish. When I asked the young devil why he had not called out, though I was more like hitting him over the head with a boat-hook, he only said, 'Cosh, you would have smashed him fine! I would have liked to see a big fat man like that flottin' in the watter!'"

Flora fairly shrieked and shrieked again with laughter, which only made her brother the more angry.

"Oh, you think that a joke, do you?" he said. "Do you know what manslaughter is? Well, the sooner he goes back to his father's croft the better; and a pretty handful the old man will have of him. I know the way he goes on at home. He'll go in of an evening, and say to his father, 'Get up out of that chair now; I'm the only one that has been at work all day, and I'm tired.' And it's mostly owing to you, Flora; and he thinks himself such a funny creature, and prides himself on every piece of devilment he can think of. Alison tried to keep some kind of control over him, though it wasn't much. He's afraid of Ludovick, certainly, but Ludovick can't be here always."

"Talk of the—ahem!" said Flora, who was facing the road. "Here he is."

Hugh turned, and there, sure enough, was Ludovick Macdonell, just entering by the gate. But he did not send them a loud and hearty greeting, as was his wont. When he came up the pathway, they could see that his face was unusually grave, and his very first words, addressed to Flora, were of an astounding character.

"Have you heard anything of Alison?" said he.

"Of Alison?" she repeated, quite taken aback. "No—we have not heard—and I was wondering she did not send us a line—but you—of course, you——"

"I declare to you I haven't heard a single word from her since she left!" he exclaimed. "Day after day, day after day, I have waited, making certain that the next morning would bring me a letter, and I have written four or five times to her; not a single word of reply! And you have heard nothing either?"

"Not anything!" said Flora, who was quite bewildered. "Ludovick—you—you don't mean to say she has never written to you since she went back to Kirk o' Shields?"

"I have not heard from her in any way whatsoever!" he answered. "She might be dead for anything I know. What can be the meaning of it? I confess that I did not write for a day or two after she left—I did not want to be too pressing; but even if she were offended with me, I made sure you would have heard from her."

"Don't think such things of Alison!" Flora said at once. "She is not offended. It is more serious than that."

He started slightly, and a curious look came suddenly over his face.

"Perhaps," said he, slowly, "it is against her will—she may not be allowed."

Hugh noticed that look.

"I say, Ludovick," he interposed, "it may be so; but you won't mend matters by doing anything in anger."

"Oh, anger or no anger!" the young man retorted impatiently—with his face grown quite pale and set hard, for he appeared to be contemplating many and distant things.

"Come into the house, Ludovick," Flora said, "and let's talk it over."

"No," he answered. "No. This will do very well. You are quite right, Flora; Alison can't be offended. It's something else—undoubtedly." He seemed hardly to know what he was saying, so intently was his mind fixed upon those distant possibilities; and a slight inflation of the nostril was the only outward sign of the war of self-control going on within. "Of course there is but the one thing—I must go and see her at once—I must go and see how she is being treated——"

Flora put her hand on his arm.

"Don't do anything rash, Ludovick—you might make matters worse——"

"Then I suppose I have not the right to see her—is that it?" he said wrathfully (but indeed he did not mean to quarrel with this kind-hearted friend: the young man was out of his senses with a quick strife of pity and indignation and anger: he was guessing at all manner of things as happening to Alison in that hateful place far away).

"Look here, Ludovick," Hugh interposed, in a gentle fashion, "consider how difficult Alison's position must be. She is between father and husband — most likely she doesn't know which to obey——"

"Obey!" he exclaimed. "I don't want her to obey anything or anybody! I want her to have the freedom that every one else in this kingdom has. Is it obeying that she may not write a line to say she is alive? Well, I'll have an end of that kind of obeying—and soon!"

"Ludovick, you don't know in the least what has happened," Hugh said; "and if you went to find out, you would be like a bull in a china shop, and make endless mischief. But there are two simple ways of getting to know, and you may take which you please. Flora can write to Agnes. If there's any objection to Alison writing to you, there can be none to Agnes

writing to her cousin, surely. On the other hand, if you like, I will go and see what it all means. Mind, I never liked this affair from the first; but now it's done, I'll stand by you and Alison; and I'll do anything you want me to do. I can go down by to-morrow morning's steamer—and by the afternoon you'll have a telegram."

"Well, there's some reason in that," Macdonell said, after some hesitation, and holding his breath a little. "But—but why should I ask for help? Why should I keep away like a coward? And—and why should I put the responsibility on to anybody else's shoulders?"

"Ludovick, what are you talking about!" Flora cried. "I thought we were friends! But if you'll take my advice, you won't let Hugh go. His other way is the better way. Let me write to Agnes. I think I can be more diplomatic than either of you. I think I can make it easy for Agnes to tell us everything we want to know, without stirring up strife; and surely I may say that mother has been surprised to have heard nothing about Alison? Come into the house, Ludovick, and I'll scribble out something like what I mean to say, and you can tell me what you think of it."

It was Flora's suggestion that was adopted, after all; and they went into the house, where she set about the composition of an exceedingly skilful letter—simple and ordinary in outward appearance, and merely as from one cousin to another; and then, somewhat more pacified, but with his hot suspicions in nowise banished, Ludovick Macdonell went away back to Oyre, and so the matter rested for the moment.

But they had not to wait for any response to these discreet inquiries: all the information—and much more than they could have dreamed of—came the very next afternoon, and to Aunt Gilchrist. Aunt Gilchrist, as it chanced, had gone out for a little walk—a very little

walk, for Periphery was not wholly dislodged, and had to be treated with some consideration; and the postman, coming along, and knowing her well enough, stopped and gave her the letter he had for her. She was not far from the garden-gate, yet she paused for a second when she recognized the handwriting on the envelope. She too had been wondering why no news had come from Alison. And here, perhaps, was the explanation.

She opened the letter, which appeared to consist of an unusual number of sheets, and was proceeding to glance over these, as she walked along, when suddenly she halted in the middle of the roadway, and stood stock-still there, while she deliberately went back to the first page and began reading every line; for this was what Mrs. Cowan of Corbieslaw, writing from Kirk o' Shields, had to say:—

"DEAR MADAM,

"I hope you will pardon my addressing you, but I am sure you have still an affectionate spot in your heart towards your misguided niece, that has got herself into such sore trouble, from the which I hope with the Lord's blessing and mercy she may be soon released, to become again a source of *thankfulness* and *cherishing* to her many friends, including yourself, dear madam. The deceitful and *wicked* young man that induced her to forget the faith of her fathers and the way of her bringing up, and to go through a *mock* marriage with a Roman Catholic, has no doubt concealed his ongoings from you, dear Mrs. Gilchrist; but his cruel designs have been frustrated, thanks to an all-wise and ever-watchful Providence; and his own conscience will do the rest, so far as he is concerned. And as for our poor dear Alison, though how she could be led into such a thing, having yourself to go to, and being in such a position with her expectations from her aunt's kindness of thought and *generosity* towards her,

I cannot imagine; but now I am thankful to say she is penitent and biddable, and will, I heartily hope and believe, do what she can to make reparation, and stand well again in her aunt's good favour. For well she knows that the marriage she was entrapped into, by such *wiles* as can be imagined, is not a marriage—it is a godless ceremony that the young man's Church, if that is to be called a Church that would destroy us soul and body, even that Church would scorn to acknowledge it, which is the more to be desired that now Alison can hold herself free from any bond, as I have to tell her again and again, and bound only by the natural obedience to her father, as far as this world below is concerned, to do all things, as he commands and ordains, under guidance of our heavenly Father, who has put this trust in his hands. And now I am glad to inform you, dear and honoured madam, that her heart, that at first was *hard* as the *nether millstone*, has softened at last; and no wonder, for when her father, in his own pulpit, before the whole congregation, had to lift up his voice and wrestle with the Lord in prayer, and supplicate that his own daughter should be brought to know how she had wandered into the paths of transgression and forsaken the home and the teaching of her youth, and become a stumbling-block to the righteous, and a shame to those of her own age that had received the Sacrament with her, it was no wonder, and I rejoiced to see it, that the tears were running down her half-hidden face in token of her penitence and contrition for the sin she had done——"

And the tears were running down Aunt Gilchrist's face too; but they were not tears of pity and sympathy at all; they were tears of maddened and impotent rage.

"If I was a man!—if I was a man!" she muttered to herself, with clinched teeth; and she could not read any more of the letter because of her streaming eyes; she

walked quickly on to the gate, and up the pathway, and into the house, dashing Flora unceremoniously aside when the wondering girl asked her what was the matter. And even in her own room she did not return to the letter. She kept marching up and down, wringing her hands in a kind of frenzy, and uttering brief exclamations from time to time.

"My lamb!—my lamb! My bairn—to be treated like that!—and not one near to comfort her!"

And then, in the very uselessness and helplessness of her indignation she sank into a seat and burst into a fit of passionate weeping—sobbing like a schoolgirl, with her handkerchief over her eyes. When she came out of that fit she was a great deal calmer; but there was a look about her face, especially about her lips, that Mrs. Cowan of Corbieslaw would not have greeted with any degree of welcome.

"And now, dear madam," the letter continued, "I would like to tell you what we have done as best beseeming your niece's interests, temporal and eternal, and as she is now convinced that the marriage she was so shamefully intrigued into would not be recognized by the Romans themselves, and that she is therefore not a wife, as the young man confesses himself, or why does he address his letters to *Miss Alison Blair*, though it is of little consequence, as she has been forbidden to answer them; but as I was saying, she is now, according to both the laws of God and man, under the government and direction of her father, who has thought fit to put some of his authority on to my shoulders, in *all kindness*, I would say, and I will take charge of her until this unhappy affair has been forgotten. It will comfort you, dear madam, to know that the wicked contract she was entrapped into will in time cease to have any power over her, for the law, as I have it on the *best authority*, leaves

a merciful way of escape for them that have been so beguiled; and in the mean time we have but to see that she is kept away from the designs and machinations of that godless young man. She has placed herself in our hands, being sincerely penitent for the shame she has brought on a Christian household; and though there will be no harshness——"

"Harshness!" said Aunt Gilchrist, with burning eyes. "My woman, if I was within reach of your ill-faured face!"

"—she has consented to do whatever she is bid, and our first step will be to remove her from any risk of further *contamination*. He will soon stop writing when he finds his letters not answered; and if he seeks her in her own home, or elsewhere, he will seek in vain. So, dear Mrs. Gilchrist, we have reason to rejoice in all proper humility and humble uplifting of a thankful heart that the sheep has returned to the fold, and that the Good Shepherd has not been robbed of one of His lambs.

"Just one word more, dear madam, if I may make so bold, for I am greatly concerned about the welfare of this poor, misguided young lady, and I would presume to hope that your *generous intentions* with regard to her *worldly* interests will not be interfered with by what has happened. The *kindness* of her *aunt* would be an additional inducement for her to persevere in the laudable course she has now entered upon; and I am sure, dear madam, that at no time could you have reconciled it with your *conscience* and your *duty* to allow any portion of your earthly possessions to come under the control of a Roman Catholic, to pay tribute to Antichrist, and help to fatten the *priests* and the *Pope*, that are the enemies of the Word and of them that dwell in Zion——'"

"Oh, this woman—this woman sickens me!" Aunt

Gilchrist cried furiously, and she went to the bell-rope and pulled it again and again.

A Highland maid-servant appeared, with eyes large, staring, and amazed.

"Bella, there's a good lass, ye'll go directly and get that lad John, and send him along to Carmichael's, and he's to get a powny there and gallop as hard's he can out to Oyre House, and tell Captain Macdonell that he's to come and see me just at once. Do ye understand, now?—and John is not to lose a moment—not a moment!"

"Oh yes, mem," said the maid, smiling. "Johnny will go fast enough when it uss a powny he hass to ride."

But she had not got down the stair when this impetuous small creature called her back.

"No, Bella, that'll no do: I'm going myself to Oyre. Send to Carmichael and say I want the waggonette at once—just at once. And, Bella, there's a good lassie, couldna ye run along yourself?—I'm no sure o' that idling fellow John."

"Oh yes, mem," the good-natured Highland girl said. "I will run along jist this moment."

Hugh, who was deep in his books at the drawing-room window, and Flora, who was busy with her shears in the garden, were considerably astonished to find the waggonette coming along at this unusual hour, and still further perplexed when they saw Aunt Gilchrist drive off alone. But Aunt Gilchrist had many things to think of; and she did not wish to be interrupted by either of these young people. As she drove away on this pleasant afternoon, she took out Mrs. Cowan's letter again, and read it carefully over, in what she fondly fancied was cold blood. She even persuaded herself that she could admire the woman's cleverness in assuming that of course Aunt Gilchrist must be opposed to her niece's committing such a crime as marriage with a Roman Catholic. Then her

references to Aunt Gilchrist's generous intentions, and certain concluding words about the possibility of brighter prospects being in store for Alison, were no doubt introduced in the interests of the probationer, the doting mother being still in hopes of seeing her offspring suitably provided with a wife and a moderate fortune.

When Aunt Gilchrist drove up to Oyre House, she perceived that Ludovick was at home, for he was standing at the door of a small conservatory, talking to the gardener, who was within. Apparently he had been amusing himself by mowing the tennis-lawn, for there was the lawn-mower standing idle, while his jacket lay on the grass a little distance off. The moment he saw who this was who had arrived, he came quickly along, picked up his jacket and put it on, and presently was at the steps of the waggonette.

"How do you do, Aunt Gilchrist?" (for so he presumed to call her now). "I suppose you have some news?"

"Oh yes, I have some news. Ye need not open the door, thank ye; I'm not coming down. Yes, I've got some news, Captain Ludovick. I've got a letter; and I'm afraid it will put ye into a very violent passion; and that'll not do—that'll not do at all. Ye'll just have to keep yourself quite calm and collected," continued this eminently cool-headed, discreet, and diplomatic person, "and we'll devise something, you and me, that may serve our turn. But cautious, cautious, ye see. We'll have to watch."

She handed him the letter. The young man began to read it, but presently he appeared quite stupefied and bewildered.

"Why, the woman's out of her senses!" he exclaimed. "Does she think there is no law in the land?"

Aunt Gilchrist knew there was worse to come: she waited that he might finish the reading.

"Well, Captain Ludovick," said she, rather breathlessly, "what—what do you think of doing?"

"Oh, I'm going straight through to Kirk o' Shields!" said he, still regarding the letter.

"Yes?" she said, with her bosom beginning to heave a little. "Yes?—I—I thought you would say that. There's — there's a man wanted to interfere. You'll answer a letter like that in person—and—and soon. I'm afraid they have been rather heavy-handed wi'—wi' my bit lady——" She made an effort to smile; but it was rather a tremulous smile; and there was a surging passion at her heart that threatened to upset all her studied self-command. "Yes, I'm afraid they have been rather heavy-handed with Alison, before they could break down her spirit and courage. Captain—Macdonell—ye're not going to see your young wife treated like that?"

"No," said he, slowly, and with darkened brows, "I don't think I am going to stand by and look on, if that is what you mean. It is about time for me to be there, I think."

Aunt Gilchrist made a desperate endeavour to suppress the emotion that was nearly getting the better of her; and then she said, with apparent quietude, though her lips were still pale and trembling—

"Yes, I thought ye would be for going to Kirk o' Shields; and—and I'll just wait for you in the waggonette, until ye've got some things put in your bag; and if ye come in to Fort William with me now, then ye'll catch the early steamer in the morning."

"That's very kind of you," he said; and he was going away absently and thoughtfully, with his head bent down, when he recollected that he ought again to ask Aunt Gilchrist to step indoors for a moment or two.

"No, thank ye, no, thank ye," she made answer; "there's no great hurry, but I feel as if there was; and

I'm better in the outside air. The truth is, Captain Ludovick, I've been just a little thing upset by this woman's letter—and—and I'm well content now to leave it all in your hands. Ay, ay, I'm thinking there'll be a different story to tell when you get to Kirk o' Shields!"

"I shan't keep you waiting three minutes, Aunt Gilchrist," said he, as he went off to put the few things together he might want.

And hardly had he gone when out there came the old laird of Oyre himself, followed by a maid-servant carrying a tray, on which was a small basket filled with fancy biscuits, and also a couple of decanters and a wine-glass.

"Indeed this is a flying feesit," said the white-haired old gentleman, whose shaggy eyebrows did not in any way interfere with the grave gentleness of his expression, and whose curiously suave and modulated speech had sounded so pleasant in Alison's ears; "and if you will not come into the house, perhaps you will take a little refreshment?" He himself handed up the biscuits to her. "And may I give you a little claret, or a little wheeskey?"

"Well, sir," said Aunt Gilchrist (who put aside for the moment her hot indignation, and who was quite touched by the extreme courtesy of the old laird's demeanour), "in the Highlands I'm sure there's nothing wholesomer than a little drop o' whiskey."

"Indeed, now, that is verry true, and my own opinion," Mr. Macdonell said, as he filled the glass and put it on the splash-board of the waggonette; "and I hef been all over the world in my younger days. I do not think there is anything better than a little wheeskey, when it is good wheeskey. And you hef heard now of the prank that this scapegrace son of mine has played?"

"Y—yes," said Aunt Gilchrist, rather nervously.

But the old laird did not seem vexed.

"I could weesh it had been different," said he, with

much good-nature; "but these foolish young people hef their own ways of looking at theengs; and I dare say it will be all right when the young bride comes to live at Oyre. And if you are seeing her, you will tell her that she will not find me in the way—oh no, if I am in the way, I will just take a small cottage, where there is a little feeshing, which is an old man's amusement, and the young people will hef the whole house to themselves."

"Indeed, sir," said Aunt Gilchrist, valiantly, "ye're just making the very proposal that would prevent Alison ever coming near the place—depend on that, sir, depend on that."

Old Mr. Macdonell seemed highly pleased.

"Well, now," said he, with a smile, "perhaps we might live in the one house after all; for I do not think I hef a verry bad temper—for a Highlander, that is to say; and if one were to judge of the young lady's disposition by her face, then I would not call her a quarrelsome pers-son."

"She's just too gentle!" Aunt Gilchrist exclaimed, with a bit of a sob (for she had been very near to crying when she was making her appeal to Captain Ludovick). "And she's fallen into ill hands—ill hands. The sooner your son takes away his young wife from among they folk the better. And I'm real glad, sir, to hear ye speak so kindly about Alison; and if she were here this moment she would show her gratitude to ye, I'm sure o' that, for she's a warm-hearted, affectionate bit crayture, despite the prim ways o' her bringing up, and her pride and dignity, that would make ye think she was the Queen o' Sheba sometimes."

"When she does come here," the old laird said, in his grave and gentle way, "there's not any one will give her a more hearty welcome than myself; and I hope you will take that as a message to your niece—that is to be my

daughter as well—I hope you will take that message to her if you should be seeing her."

Here Ludovick made his appearance, pitched his travelling-bag up beside the driver, and stepped into the waggonette; the horses sprung forward; the white-haired old Highlander raised his glengarry, and went off into the house again; and Aunt Gilchrist and her companion found themselves with this long drive before them during which they could discuss what forthwith was to be done.

But on one point Aunt Gilchrist was very nearly becoming angry with the young man. She could not understand the curious leniency, or perhaps it was rather the contemptuous indifference, with which he seemed to regard Mrs. Cowan of Corbieslaw.

"She is merely a stupid and ignorant person," said he.

"She's a cunning she-devil," Aunt Gilchrist exclaimed vindictively; "a bold, impudent, brazen-faced woman!"

"I dare say she thinks she is acting quite properly, and for the best interests of everybody concerned—and especially with regard to the interests of her son, for very good people sometimes give way to a little natural bias. But I wonder," he continued, "what she means by saying that the law offers some way of escape to any one in Alison's position? I suppose she has got hold of some vulgar superstition—there are plenty such, and particularly with regard to marriage. However, I don't think there will be much trouble about that. If it comes to be a question of claiming authority—well, I have in my pocket at this moment a little document that I think will settle that point. Would you like to see it, Aunt Gilchrist?"

"Yes, I should," said Aunt Gilchrist, getting out her gold-rimmed glasses.

But this was hardly a small document that he drew from his pocket—this oblong sheet of lilac-hued paper,

with its printed matter resplendent in green ink, and with a number of hand-written entries in its parallel columns. Aunt Gilchrist, having fixed her eye-glasses, got hold of this formidable document; and by the aid of the after-glow that was shining all around them, and that made those green-printed lines look strange, she easily mastered its contents. It was entitled "*Extract of an Entry in a Register of Marriages kept in the undermentioned Parish, or District, in terms of* 17° *and* 18° *Victoriæ*, Cap. 80. §§ 56 and 58;" and then in its successive columns were all the details of the marriage between Ludovick Macdonell, bachelor, of Oyre House, Lochaber, and Alison Blair, spinster, of 5, East Street, Kirk o' Shields. Their respective ages were given; the names of father and mother on each side; the date of the sheriff-substitute's warrant; and finally the signature of the registrar. Aunt Gilchrist found herself figuring there, along with Hugh Munro, as a witness of the marriage: in short, this paper contained a complete history of the ceremony, and an exhibition of the forms that had been gone through, as by law ordained.

Aunt Gilchrist laughed, and said—

"I'm thinking they'll discover it's rather difficult to get over that!" But then her eyes grew anxious again. "And, oh, Captain Ludovick, ye'll lose no time in finding out poor Alison, and protecting her, and comforting her! It just breaks my heart to think what she must have been suffering—and alone, too—quite alone, ye may say, with nobody to take her part——"

"As soon as I can get hold of Alison herself it will be all right, Aunt Gilchrist," said he. "I can guess pretty clearly what they've been about. They have told her lies about her not being married; and they have brought the reproach of the congregation to bear on her, and all kinds of fanatical terrorisms; then she had no one to

appeal to; no doubt they threatened her with pains and penalties if she even wrote a letter. I don't suppose they have locked her up: this is the nineteenth century—though in some things it hardly seems to be the nineteenth century in Kirk o' Shields; but anyhow, if they have locked her up, you may trust me to find the key And there's another thing, Aunt Gilchrist: when we reach Fort William, I don't think I'll go along to the Munroes'; I will stay at the hotel, and be off by the first steamer in the morning. The fact is, it would be no use having this matter discussed by the whole family. You know, both Doctor and Mrs. Munro were against the marriage; and although they are too good-natured to say 'I told you so,' still I suppose they would naturally exaggerate this trouble that has come along. I shall have to find out about it first for myself; but you may tell Hugh that if I want him to come and help me, I will telegraph to him."

So the little old dame—in a measure satisfied with what she had done—went back by herself to the Munroes' villa, and found the household assembling for supper. She was very reticent over what had occurred; but subsequently she told Flora that Captain Ludovick was setting out next morning for Kirk o' Shields, and that quite possibly Hugh might be sent for.

CHAPTER XX.

MAN TO MAN.

THE only hotel that calls itself a hotel in Kirk o' Shields is chiefly a public-house on the ground-floor, with the upper rooms devoted to the entertainment of an occasional commercial traveller. It was at this hostelry that Ludovick Macdonell arrived, deposited his travelling-bag, and told the good landlady that he should want some dinner in the evening; then he immediately sallied forth, making straight for the Minister's house. And very little did he notice of the squalor of these thoroughfares, or of the thick pall of smoke that did duty for a sky; nor had he any objection to this dull thunderous roar of hammer and engine and forge that seemed to fill the air for leagues around. To him Kirk o' Shields was an engrossingly interesting, even a fascinating, place: why, Alison had walked along these streets; when she was in Lochaber, she had spoken of them and thought of them; now, at this very moment, there was the possibility that at any corner he might suddenly find himself face to face with—Alison!

He knocked at the Minister's door; it was opened by the red-headed, freckled servant-lass Jean. And it was clear that she instantly recognized him; for she retreated half a step, her black eyes looking frightened.

"Is Miss Alison at home?" he asked.

"N—no, sir," she stammered in reply.

"When will she be at home?"

"She's no staying here, sir!" the girl answered, rather breathlessly.

"What?" he said—for indeed he had paid but little attention to Mrs. Cowan's threats.

"I dinna ken; and—and if I did ken, I daurna tell ye, sir."

He seemed rather bewildered.

"What nonsense is this?" he said impatiently. "Is the Minister at home?"

"No, sir; this is ane o' his veesitin days."

"Well, Miss Agnes, then?"

"No, Miss Agnes is oot the noo."

He was disconcerted only for a moment.

"Well, I'm coming in to wait until I see somebody," he said, in a sufficiently decisive fashion; and as he forthwith entered the house, she had of course to make way for him; and she shut the outer door when he had gone by.

But as soon as she had followed him into the little parlour, an odd change came over Jean's manner: she was now quite eager and communicative—in this safe privacy.

"Indeed, sir, there's been an awfu' to do; and ye'll jist say ye insisted on coming into the hoose; for although I dinna think much o' my place—they unco guid folk are ower guid for the like o' me—I dinna want to be turned oot neck and crop at anither body's biddin'; and I wasna to tell ye onything, or let ye into the hoose, or say a word to ye——"

"And whose orders were these?" he asked.

"Mrs. Cowan's," Jean said, looking a little frightened again.

"Is Mrs. Cowan your mistress?"

"No, Guid be thankit!" the girl said fervently. "But ye see, sir, she's ta'en the upperhand in a' this; and mind,

ye maun say ye cam' into the hoose withoot ony will o' mine; but I'll tell ye what I can—I wull, I wull—if I'm sent back to Lernock-end the morn's morning. And I tell ye, sir, it's a downright crying shame the way they've been treatin' Miss Alison—preachin' at her frae the pulpit—frae the pulpit before a' they folk!—and that auld wife Cowan whinin' and whinin' aboot penitence and remission o' sins—it's just—it's just—but I'll no say a bad word, though they've been near drivin' me to't mair than ance; and there's Miss Agnes maistly oot o' her senses, and clean oot o' them she'll be ere lang—I've to sleep beside her at nichts, that was Miss Alison's last word, and it's greetin' for hours she is; and then terrible talkin' about angels, and thrones; and her mother, that's dead and gone, puir body, ye would think her mother and hersel' were greetin' thegither about what has happened to Miss Alison. I declare I'm jist fair scunnered wi' they unco releegious folk, and I dinna care a docken how sune I'm back on Lernock-side again, and herdin' my faither's kye, if I only get a sup o' milk for't!"

But the red-headed Jean's eager volubility contained no information.

"Look here, my good girl," said he gently, "if you consider that Miss Alison has been so ill-used, don't you think you could give me a little help? I've come to take her part—probably she will go away with me altogether. And I dare say you have been told not to say where she is: well, I won't ask you to tell me, plump and plain—still, couldn't you give me some small hint—just some kind of indication, you know, without actually saying anything that would get you into trouble?"

He put his hand in his waistcoat-pocket, and pulled out a sovereign; but the moment she saw the money she shrank back.

"Na, na; I'll hae nane o' that!" said she, with con-

siderable emphasis. "I dinna ken what's to be the upshot o' a' this; and I'm no going to be cross-questioned before the Fiscal."

He hesitated for a moment. He was not quite sure of her; nor was he quite sure what he himself should do. It seemed too absurd that anybody should suppose that Alison could be carried off in this way and hidden from him. And might not this be merely a story that the servant-lass had been authorized to tell? Was it not quite probable that Alison was at this very moment upstairs—confined to her room under strict injunctions from her father? He looked at Jean again. Then he quietly went to the door, and opened it a few inches.

"Don't you think now," he said, fixing his eyes hard on the girl, "don't you think now, that if I were to call loud enough, Miss Alison would hear?"

But she was not startled.

"Ye think I'm leein—I'm *not* leein!" she said, indignantly. "If I kenned where Miss Alison was, I do believe I'd tell ye, and snap my fingers at the whole crew o' them—Corbieslaw as weel, though it was him got me my place."

"I do believe you would," he said; for he could no longer doubt the girl's sincerity; "and you'll just take this little present from me to buy yourself some ribbons when the fair-time comes round. It isn't a bribe; you haven't told me any secret; and the Fiscal may cross-examine you until his head drops off, when you have nothing to confess—don't you see that?"

He made her take the money; and they had some further conversation together, during which he learned that the Minister would not be home until the "hinner-end" of the day, and also that Jean was perfectly certain that Miss Agnes was as ignorant as herself concerning Alison's whereabouts. In these circumstances he con-

sidered that it was hardly worth his while to spend the intervening hours in this dull little parlour; and so, saying that he would return about the time the Minister was expected back, he left the house and wandered out into the streets.

But the more he thought over all this matter, the more intolerable the insolence of this woman Cowan seemed to become. A cunning she-devil, Aunt Gilchrist had called her; and no doubt she had got the Minister well under her thumb before he had allowed her to assume such authority over his own daughter. As for the farce of carrying Alison away into hiding, Captain Ludovick at first paid little heed to that. It was a preposterous piece of impudence, and nothing more. We were living in the nineteenth century. The Minister was a reasonable human being; as soon as he was appealed to he would recognize the futility of this attempted seclusion. It was merely the act of an intermeddling and ignorant woman, who did not know that there was such a thing as an order of the Court of Session—a remarkably imperative kind of thing, moreover. No doubt the Minister was a sort of recluse, and little conversant with the world's affairs; he had allowed this officious busybody to take charge of Alison; and it was her idiotic notion that she could keep the young wife away from her husband by the simple expedient of removing her to some other dwelling. Which of these houses, then, held Alison? Might she not see him from one of these windows? Or was it possible he might meet her coming along this very thoroughfare—or coming round the corner of the next street? For they could not have locked her up. He reminded himself again that we were living in the nineteenth century; and, indeed, was not much concerned about this foolish travesty of concealment.

But matters assumed a very different aspect in the

evening. When he returned to the house, Mr. Blair was at home; and Captain Macdonell was shown into the parlour. A moment thereafter the Minister made his appearance—the deeply-lined, sallow, sad face showing neither surprise nor anger, but only a calm self-possession; and when he came into the room the two men remained standing, facing each other.

"Mr. Blair, I want you to tell me where Alison is," Macdonell said at once, and without further ceremony.

"By what right do you ask?" the Minister made answer slowly.

The younger man was rather taken aback.

"By what right? By a very good right, I imagine. I presume you know—indeed, you must know—that Alison and I are married."

The Minister regarded him for a moment in silence; and then said, in his measured and deliberate fashion—

"You show some confidence, young man, in coming to me—to me, her father—with any such demand. I will not ask you what has been your conduct towards a young girl deprived for a brief time of parental guidance and advice, unprotected, alone, and ignorant of the consequences of her acts. I leave that to your own conscience. I am aware that in the hey-day of youth there may be an impetuosity that spurns all considerations and would sacrifice all interests and duties to its own selfish ends; but in time the still small voice makes itself heard—if God is merciful to the transgressor. I do not seek now to bring home to you a sense of what you have done; I leave that in higher hands than mine; but when you come to me and ask me to give my daughter into your charge—knowing as I do, that the consequence must be her spiritual ruin, the forfeiture of her soul's birthright—you cannot wonder if I distinctly say no."

"You call yourself a clergyman, a minister," Mac-

donell said hotly, "and you want to come between man and wife!"

But this stern-faced sad-eyed old man was not to be moved into any angry retort.

"Well you know," he said, in those measured, impressive tones, "that your own Church—false and perverted, as we deem it to be, and a fountain of iniquity—even your Church refuses to recognize a civil marriage. And you, are you not governed by its doctrines and practices? Who is your lord and king? The Pope of Rome. In his eyes you are not married. In his eyes my daughter is not bounden to you by any tie whatever. If you have a master, why not obey him? If you set him up as your king, why not serve him? If you have raised your idol on high, give him the worship and obedience due to him—and leave my daughter to live and die among her own kindred and those of her own faith."

It was the very simplicity and dignity of this man—his inviolable and serene conviction—that seemed to drive Macdonell to desperation. He felt as if he were dashing himself against impalpable barriers that he was powerless to remove.

"I do know this," he said somewhat excitedly, "that civil marriages are established by the law of this kingdom, and that whoever comes between husband and wife does so at his or her own peril. Do you think you can shut Alison up for ever? Do you think there is no means of discovering her? Why, I thought it was merely some foolish trick of that woman Cowan! But now you come forward; you interpose; you accept the responsibility of what this ignorant woman appears to have done. Well, what do you expect will come of it? What do you hope to gain by it?"

"With God's blessing," the Minister said calmly enough, "we hope to undo much, if not all, of the evil

you have wrought. We hope to bring the child to a perception of her error in having strayed away from the fold of her own people. Her seclusion may be temporary: when she comes forth from it, she will come forth as one purified and restored to her right mind; and she will return to dwell within the tents of Israel, among her own."

"But this is mere madness!" the younger man exclaimed, for he was rapidly losing his self-control. "She is married! She is my wife! I don't know what your particular congregation may think; but I know that even in Catholic countries, let alone Protestant countries, civil marriages are recognized as freely as any other; and I know in this country, that the law, which institutes civil marriage, is bound to hold it valid. Valid?—I should think it was! There is no marriage more absolute and irrevocable. And do you imagine I am going to stand by and allow Alison to be shut up like that, and preached at, and lectured into submission, and whined over? I want to learn something about this instruction that is going on: I'm not quite satisfied about the gentle ways of the saints. And am I to understand that you definitely and finally refuse to tell me where Alison is?"

"I do refuse," the Minister said, with tranquil self-possession.

"You don't know that I can compel you, then?" he demanded, with eyes afire.

"I know you cannot," was the calm answer.

"You think there is no law in this country?"

"You may appeal to the law if you choose to do so," Mr. Blair said slowly. "But there is no law in this country that can force me to open my mouth when my conscience bids me be silent; and there is no law in this country that can compel me to hand my child over to the emissaries of Satan. You may appeal to the law, young

man: I owe obedience to a higher law: every moment of my life I stand before a tribunal compared with which all other tribunals are but as grains of sand on the sea-shore. We who regard all temporal things as of small moment stand in the presence of a greater Judge. 'The Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our King.'"

The moral grandeur of this old man, his unflinching courage, the lofty position he had assumed were all lost upon his younger and fiercer antagonist, who exclaimed passionately—

"Very well, then, take the consequences! You have treated that harmless girl—who is my wife, and whom I mean to protect, in spite of you—I say you have treated her with the most monstrous cruelty; and since you have determined to bear the brunt of it, you shall! You will discover that the laws of this country are not to be defied with impunity, whatever sophistical arguments you apply to your conscience. I tell you that I have the right to claim my wife; you accept the responsibility of concealing her; and if you persist in your refusal to produce her, then you will have leisure to think over your own folly, when you find yourself within the four walls of a jail!"

The Minister responded, with perfect serenity—

"I fear no earthly judge, nor any penalty he may inflict. In all things I would willingly obey those that are set in authority over us; but my chief allegiance lies elsewhere. If I have to go to prison, I hope to be as Peter and the other apostles when they were called before the Council and commanded to be beaten—they rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name."

"Then to prison you shall go!" the young man said—his face grown bloodless and terrible to see; and without another word he burst from the room, and made his way along the passage, opening the door for himself, and issuing into the street.

It was getting to dusk now; and mechanically and blindly he walked back to the humble hostelry, where dinner was awaiting him; but he could not eat anything; rage and fury filled his heart. He sat for a time there, thinking or trying to think: then he got up and went out and made straight away for the open country—if that could be called country where there were forges and furnaces more frequently than farms, where there were stone dikes instead of hedges, and where the road-side he walked on was composed of cinders and broken slag. Into this mysterious dusk, lighted up by the wild flames of the iron-works, he walked recklessly and aimlessly, conjuring up all kinds of imaginary fears and evils, chiefly consisting of cruelties being practised on Alison. For the situation was far more serious now. This was no longer a mere ignorant device on the part of a stupid, ambitious, and scheming woman. This was a deliberate attempt to break the spirit of the girl; a conspiracy; and a conspiracy not over-scrupulous about invoking religious terrorism as a means of accomplishing its aim. And the law was on his side, he knew.

"Stone-walls do not a prison make?" he said to himself, with savage irony. "Well, perhaps not; but they form a remarkably good imitation of it!"

For he was determined to hold the Minister responsible for this thing that had been done—done with his sanction, if not even at his suggestion. Where Mrs. Cowan might be he knew not. Perhaps she had taken Alison out of the country altogether, in the hope that absence, and pious counsel, and misrepresentation and calumny might bring the girl to a final renunciation of her lover and husband. Where Alison might be—where her cunning she-devil of a guardian might be—he could not tell; but the Minister knew—he was here—he could be got at—he should be made to speak, if there was any law in this land.

And if he would not speak?—then to jail with him! The Court of Session had a short way of dealing with fanatics. Bravado was all very fine; but bravado sometimes collapsed in presence of prison-fare and inside four square walls.

The young man's heart was hot within him. He began to recall, with a painful acuteness, certain terms of Mrs. Cowan's letter; and the fancy that his young wife might be suffering all kinds of mental and moral torture in some unknown place, and thinking of him, and wondering why he did not come to her rescue—all this drove him to the verge of frenzy. He did not notice that it was now raining fast; and he had neither over-coat nor umbrella. The black night was all around him; and above him the heavy, red-pulsating skies: sometimes one of the iron-works sent up a sudden flame that threw his shadow across the half-seen highway. But while this wild war of piteous commiseration, and indignant wrath, and thirst for vengeance, seemed driving him to distraction, plans were forming too. The very next morning he would go to Edinburgh and see his old friend Balwhinnan, an advocate there. Mr. Balwhinnan would advise him how to put the courts in motion; the conspirators would speedily learn whether they could with impunity steal away a young wife from her husband. Going to jail for conscience' sake sounded very noble and heroic: perhaps when the moment arrived, that fanatical resolution would falter. But if not—if the Minister still remained obdurate—then let the law take its course! If there were any question about the validity of the marriage, if there were any doubt as to the young husband's legal claim, this would be his answer! Perhaps the doubts would be removed when the doubter found himself within the compass of a prison-cell.

And sometimes a haunting voice would try to say to

him, "What is this you are about to do? On whom are you going to wreak your vengeance? In your inmost heart you know that this old man is no fanatic, no maniac, no charlatan, but one who believes in the Divine government of the world, who knows that for every action of his life he is accountable to his Maker, who is ready to suffer all things rather than offend against his conscience. Are you so blind that you cannot perceive the moral elevation —the invulnerable and austere integrity—of such a man? What does he care for your threats? What are your prison-walls to him?"

But he would not hear. Before his burning eyes there was a vision of Alison in her father's pew, her head bent forward, and tears streaming down her face, while that congregation of sanctimonious Pharisees looked on and rejoiced that the Minister's daughter was stricken low and repentant and ashamed of her transgression. And there was another vision as well—of Aunt Gilchrist's "cunning she-devil"—the cat-like guardian of her pale prisoner, the whining preacher, the wheedling and coaxing match-maker; and he swore with his teeth set hard that the lawyers should pay a little attention to her also!

By-and-by he turned and set out again for Kirk o' Shields, through the thick rain. There was no chance of his missing his way—the sombre red glow was ever present there, in the midst of the black night. When he reached the inn he was drenched through; but with the carelessness of a Highlander he sat down and ate some food; and then he told the people that when he went to bed they must get his clothes dried, for he was leaving early in the morning. It was to Edinburgh he was going.

CHAPTER XXI.

SOME SURPRISES.

On Macdonell's arrival in Edinburgh he drove to a hotel in Prince's Street, where he was well-known, left his travelling-gear there, and forthwith set out on foot to seek his friend Balwhinnan, whose house was in Moray Place. There had been rain earlier in the morning, but now wan gleams of sunshine were appearing; and picturesque indeed were those masses of tall black buildings, and the innumerable spires, and the great bulk of the castled rock all rising away into a confusion of golden clouds and moving mists and smoke. But he had little thought either for the outward aspect of this noble thoroughfare, or for the thousand memories and associations that it naturally awakens. His heart was burning with a fierce desire for vengeance—vengeance on those who had taken away his young wife from him, and treated her so cruelly. And when he got to Moray Place, and found that the famous advocate was at home, he rejoiced in his wrath; retribution, swift and dire, was now to be meted out, and that with a firm hand.

He was ushered into a long and lofty apartment which seemed to be partly a library and partly an ornithological museum; for above the shelves of books that went round the walls there ran a continuous glass-case filled with stuffed birds—mostly sea-birds from the northern coasts and isles—while on a table close up to one of the windows some skins were lying, along with all the implements of

the taxidermist's art, pins, sealing-wax, colours, glass eyes, arsenic paste, and what not. Had his mind been less perturbed, he might have sought out in that collection certain specimens that he himself had contributed; but as it was he was waiting impatiently for the lawyer's appearance.

The door opened; Mr. Balwhinnan entered, bawling out a jovial and hearty greeting as he came forward to meet his friend. He was a man of about six feet two in height, spare of frame, with a long, thin, clean-shaven face, a retreating forehead, an aquiline nose, sandy hair, fresh complexion, and gray eyes that were sufficiently merry and good-natured.

"And what's brought ye to Edinburgh, Macdonell?" he cried, as he hauled along a couple of chairs to the central table. "Man, that was a fine velvet duck you sent me—as handsome a fellow as ever I set eyes on; do you see him up yonder?"

Macdonell did not even glance in the direction indicated.

"Look here, Balwhinnan," said he, "I've come to ask you for advice in a very serious affair. You know Gemmill and Inglis do what little law-business we want done; but I could not go to them about this matter; I want the advice of a friend as well as a lawyer; you must tell me precisely what my position is, and what steps I am to take."

Then Ludovick Macdonell began and told his story; and it might have been remarked that during this narrative a singular change came over Mr. Balwhinnan's expression. He was no longer the bluff, hearty, sportsman-looking person who had noisily come into the room; his eyes had lost their merry good-nature and were keen and scrutinizing; his lips seemed to be thinner; and it may be added that if his forehead was distinctly retreating his head was long-shaped behind. Watchful and silent he

sat, until the tale was told; and it was not for a second or two thereafter that he attempted to answer the younger man's appeal.

"My good fellow," said he slowly, "you have certainly got yourself into a very extraordinary position, and the way out of it isn't as easy as you seem to imagine. I'm afraid the law is powerless to do what you want. You see, if it were the case of a child who was being kept back and concealed, and if you were her legal guardian, you could petition the Court of Session for the custody of the child; you would get a warrant for her recovery, and if the person concealing her refused to hand her over, or refused to tell the court where she was, that person would forthwith find himself or herself in prison. But your wife is in the eyes of the law capable of acting for herself; she is away from you of her own free-will; and the law of Scotland gives the husband no power to compel his wife to live with him against her inclination. Of course," said he, with a swift look of inquiry, "I assume that she *is* away of her own free-will? You don't suppose that she is locked up anywhere and kept a prisoner by force?"

"No, no; that is too absurd," Macdonell said hastily; "but if I admit that she is away of her own free-will, I mean that she has been subjected to all kinds of influences, that she has been misinformed and terrorized over; and what is more, I am perfectly certain of this, that if I could compel them to tell me where she is, if I could get to her, I should have no trouble at all in bringing her away from them. None. I know her too well. I know what they have been doing——"

"Yes, yes, my dear fellow," Mr. Balwhinnan said bluntly, "but in the mean time you must take it that she is remaining away from you of her own choice. Now, I am afraid it is English law that has been running in

your head. In England the husband can not only bring a suit for the restitution of conjugal rights, and compel his wife to live with him, whether she is willing or not, but he can also bring an action for damages against any one who is foolish or daring enough to harbour her. Here it isn't so at all. In Scotland the law gives better protection to the wife who, for whatever reason, is resolved to remain apart from her husband; and not only that, but provision is made by which the marriage may be annulled——"

"Good heavens, man, what are you talking about!" Macdonell exclaimed, in sudden dismay. For was this the loophole of escape that Mrs. Cowan had spoken of? Perhaps she was not so ignorant after all? "You don't mean to say that a legal marriage can be dissolved for that reason alone?"

"In Scotland, yes," Mr. Balwhinnan replied calmly. "And why not? It is a just and a reasonable statute. What is the use of compelling husband and wife to live together when either is unwilling? What happiness can result, from that? Our Scotch law protects the wife, certainly; but it also gives the husband his remedy. It does not say that the wife, if she chooses, may remain apart from her husband, and the husband still remain tied by the marriage-bond. No. That would be obviously and monstrously unfair. What he is entitled to do is to bring an action for adherence; then if she doesn't obey the order of the court—that is to say, if she refuses to come and live with him—at the expiry of four years he can get a divorce from her, and both are freed."

"Do you mean that he can get a divorce from her for that reason alone?" Macdonell demanded, with not a little consternation—for it was becoming clear to him what the woman Cowan had meant.

"Undoubtedly," was the lawyer's answer. "And that is all he can do. He has no compulsory power over her

whatsoever. And that is the awkwardness of your position, my good friend. By George, I wish I could help you! But I can't: all the lawyers in the kingdom couldn't. What you've got to do is to find out for yourself where your wife is, and then you can reason with her, or perhaps get her away from any terrorism that may be held over her. But that is for herself to say; they cannot keep her, you cannot take her, against her will."

Macdonell rose and began to pace up and down the floor in the greatest perplexity and perturbation.

"Oh, I know what she would do if I could only get hold of her hand for a moment!" he exclaimed presently. "Do you think I don't know that? Do you think she married me for nothing? It was to be a bond between us for ever, just in case her friends should interfere! They have interfered; they have told her lies; they have frightened her with the horror and sanctimonious lamentation of those elders and their wives; then she has been accustomed to obey her father; and this she-devil of a woman has coaxed or wheedled or threatened her into compliance. I have no doubt she said to herself, 'Well, what does it matter? I will obey them; the bond between my husband and myself remains all the same; they cannot break that; and he will come and take me away before long.' And do you mean to tell me," he continued passionately, "that I have no means of claiming my own? The law gives her to me, but gives me no power to claim her, even if she is willing to come! I cannot compel those people to say where she is? I cannot send them to jail if they refuse to tell me? There is the old man her father: he takes the whole responsibility on his shoulders; he comes forward and gives you to understand that it is his doing—and yet the law can neither make him speak nor punish him for refusing to speak. Is that the law?"

The long sandy-haired advocate answered quietly enough, "If it is revenge you want, you can have it."

"Then I do want it!" the young man said vehemently. "Not revenge—I don't want revenge—I want punishment. If that old Minister will not tell me where Alison is, I want to see him lodged in jail—and kept there until he speaks!"

"Oh, you can do that," Mr. Balwhinnan said. "But mind this, Macdonell, while I tell you, as a lawyer, what the law is, I don't, as a friend, advise you to put it in operation. And there is no doubt you could have the old gentleman sent to prison; but it would be by means of a trick—well, I won't precisely say that, but you could only proceed against him indirectly. What you would have to do would be to bring your action for adherence; then call him as a witness; he could be asked to say where his daughter was; and if the court ordered him to answer, and if—as is very likely, for those old Free Kirk fellows have stubborn wills where their conscience is concerned—if he refused to answer, he would assuredly be sent to prison for contempt."

"Very well, then, I'll have it done!" the young man said, with resolute lips.

The long lawyer lay back in his chair, and regarded his friend.

"Don't you think," he said slowly, "that you could find some quieter way out of it? It would rather make a scandal, wouldn't it? If you are so sure that the young lady would forsake them and come away with you if once you had the chance of removing certain false impressions from her mind, wouldn't it be better to seek for that chance?"

"Bless my soul! how can I search all Scotland to find her?" the younger man cried. "And how do I know that she is in Scotland? They may have taken her abroad."

"I should imagine," Mr. Balwhinnan made answer, with professional serenity, "from all you have told me, that it is almost a matter of certainty she is under the guardianship of that Mrs. Cowan. Well, now, do you think a Lanarkshire farmer's wife is the kind of person to pay a flying visit to the south of Spain, or adventure on a voyage out to the Canaries? I should fancy you might try somewhere nearer home. What was the name of the farm you mentioned?"

"Corbieslaw."

"In the neighbourhood of Kirk o' Shields?"

"Yes."

"Don't you think, now, you might pay a little attention to that farm-house?" the lawyer said, glancing at his friend. "A little prospecting about would do no harm. I wouldn't have any professional detective as yet; but you might get somebody to keep an eye on the place——"

"By Jove, Balwhinnan, that is a most sensible suggestion," Ludovick exclaimed, with eagerness, for his imagination was fired by the possibility of finding Alison so near him, and so soon to be discovered and released and borne away in triumph—"a capital suggestion! I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll telegraph to her cousin Hugh, in Fort William—he's a great chum of mine—and he'll come through at once, and bring with him as well a young lad they have there, who has the cunning and the endurance of a wild-cat; and we'll see if among us we can't find out Alison. Hugh can come down to Oban by this evening's steamer, stay the night there, and catch the first train in the morning. Of course he will stop at Kirk o' Shields station, and I shall be there to meet him, even if I go through this evening—no, not this evening"—he corrected himself, with sudden remorse for his forgetfulness of this good friend's kindness to him. "No, I want you to dine with me this evening, Balwhinnan; will you?"

"Yes, I will," the other said promptly; "for my wife is with her Wigtownshire friends at present. And as it is near lunch-time now, you'll just walk along with me to my club, and we'll have a snack, and then I want you to look at some new additions to the Advocates' Library."

"All right," Macdonell said. "I'm always glad to drop in there, if only to have a glance at the standard that that brave fellow brought home from Flodden Field."

"And there's another thing I want to say to you, my young sir," the advocate continued, as the two of them were walking towards Prince's Street. "Mrs. Balwhinnan will be home again in a few days' time. Now, if you succeed in liberating the captive, I suppose—well, it's none of my business—but I should imagine you might be contemplating a little wedding-trip just to get the young lady securely away from those people. In that case, she wouldn't be likely to have bridal travelling-dresses, and such things, eh? Well, if you want to have her nicely fitted out, just you bring her along to Moray Place, and she will be our guest for a few days, and Mrs. Balwhinnan will be delighted to be a mother to her; for of course she must go abroad with all due state and ceremony."

"Do you mean that?" Macdonell said, involuntarily stopping short for a second, and with his eyes flashing gratitude.

"I sometimes mean what I say, although I am a lawyer," the tall Sutherlandshire-looking man made answer imperturbably, as he continued his long, measured stride across Charlotte Square.

But these anticipations were all too premature and roseate, as Ludovick Macdonell was soon to discover. When Hugh, accompanied by Johnny—who regarded this expedition into foreign countries as a very wonderful thing indeed—arrived in Kirk o' Shields, all three set

about their amateur-detective work with the greatest eagerness, and also with the certain conviction they must discover where Alison was concealed. But day after day went by, and they could find no clue whatsoever. They bribed the letter-carrier who traversed the Corbieslaw district; and Macdonell made the acquaintance of the modest and shy-eyed young lady who was behind the counter at the post-office; but the most cautious and discreet of questions met with no satisfactory reply. It was the especial charge of Johnny, as being a less conspicuous figure than Hugh or Ludovick, to keep an eye on Corbieslaw farm; and this duty he performed most faithfully; for, indeed, how could there be a more delightful occupation than to sit on the top of a stone dike, with one's hands in one's pockets, and with whole hours in which to whistle "The Hills of Glenorchy"? Nevertheless, this espionage did not wholly commend itself to Johnny's mind.

"What uss't Macdonell wants?" he said to Hugh, on one occasion, when Captain Ludovick chanced to be absent. "Does he want to put the auld wife into the pollus-offus?"

"Never you mind what he wants," Hugh made answer. "It's your business to find out whether Miss Alison is at the farm."

"If I wass Macdonell," said John, in his cool fashion, "I would find that out for myself—ay, before another hour wass over."

"And how could you find it out?" Hugh said contemptuously.

"I would tek a stuck in my hand," said Johnny, "and I would go up to the farm, and I would go into the house, and I would go into every room in the house, and if any one tried to stop me I would hit him over the head with the stuck."

"Yes, you would have somebody in the police-office very soon—but it would be yourself."

"Cosh, but I would find out, though," John maintained confidently. "Macdonell uss a strong man: with a stuck in his hand, who would try to stop him?"

However, both Hugh and Captain Ludovick were now inclining to the belief that neither Mrs. Cowan nor Alison was at Corbieslaw. Johnny brought reports about all the other people—the farmer himself, the fledgling minister, the men and women servants—but no one answering to the description of the farmer's wife had made her appearance; and it was unlikely she would have remained indoors all this time had she been in the house. Their vigilant search was turned elsewhither, but with a distressing vagueness of aim. Mr. Balwhinnan's idea was that Mrs. Cowan and her charge would be found to have gone not very far away; but in what direction? And the more Macdonell chafed at this enforced delay, and the more helpless he felt himself, and the more he harrowed himself with baleful fancies as to all that Alison might be suffering, the more he returned to his sombre thoughts of vengeance.

"And that's what it is coming to," he said to Hugh, as they conversed together in the inn, of an evening, over the one all-engrossing subject. "That is what must be done. Oh, it's all very well for you to talk of abstract right; but I want rough justice done; and justice says that if this old man will not tell me where Alison is, then let him go to jail! What do I care what the public say? I'm not thinking about the public; I'm thinking about Alison."

"Why are you defending yourself so vehemently, Ludovick?" Hugh retorted, and also with some warmth. "Because you know that if you do this thing you will be acting wrongly and meanly, and in a way you will regret all your life! Why, according to your own version of

the story, Alison's father is to be respected: it is his conscience that refuses to tell you what you want to know."

"His conscience!" Ludovick exclaimed. "Has he the only conscience in the world? But that's the way with people who pride themselves on having a highly superior and sensitive conscience; they alone have such a thing; other people haven't any! Their sense of right allows them to take away a young girl and treat her most cruelly; but if my sense of right tells me that I shall be a contemptible coward if I don't use every means in my power to prevent them so treating her, then I am to pay no heed to that? They've got all the conscience, then? Conscience only exists and lives in Kirk o' Shields, and in that congregation of whining Pharisees!"

"I can quite understand your anger, Ludovick," Hugh said, in his gentle way, and yet with a quiet firmness that seemed beyond his years, "and your impatience and indignation; but I tell you that if you set the law in operation against this old man, you will be doing the wrong thing. I shouldn't be your friend if I did not say so. It isn't right; you may talk and argue as much as you please, but it isn't the right thing. You would see that for yourself, if you weren't fancying every minute that Alison was being treated harshly. But do you think that probable? Do you think she is the sort of girl to submit tamely? Well, I don't. She could always hold her own with Aunt Gilchrist: is it likely she would let this Mrs. Cowan intimidate her?"

"I won't allow any man or woman to try!" young Macdonell said, with burning eyes. "No, not if I can step in to take her part!"

"But is it likely she is being badly treated?" Hugh said again. "Look at the letter that Mrs. Cowan wrote to Aunt Gilchrist."

"Yes!—and Alison before the whole congregation of them—crying."

"But apparently she is under Mrs. Cowan's charge now," Hugh continued; "and what motive could she have for treating Alison badly? Look at the letter. It was a slavish and despicable letter, no doubt, but it was all done to propitiate Aunt Gilchrist, and to keep her in the same mind as regards Alison and the money she intends to give her. Mrs. Cowan means to get that money for her son's wife: is she likely to do anything that would offend either Alison or Aunt Gilchrist?"

"Yes, but I want to know: I want to see for myself," the young husband said. "It seems to me I have some right to learn for myself what is going on. And I tell you this, that whoever stands in my way must take the consequences."

"Ludovick," said this gentle-voiced lad, "I dare say you don't care what people generally would say; but I want to ask you this: supposing you get your Edinburgh lawyers to bring the whole affair into court, and supposing that Mr. Blair refuses to answer, then no doubt he will have to suffer the consequences: but, Ludovick, what will Alison think of the man who has sent her father to prison?"

Macdonell winced at this, and was silent for a moment or two; but then he said—

"I don't send him to prison. If he chooses to defy the law of the country, it is that sends him to prison. Why should he be exempted any more than any one else? If a man breaks into my house, and robs me, it isn't I who send him to prison; it is the law, that all of us have to obey. And why should this old Minister be exempt? If, out of pure pig-headed obstinacy, he courts imprisonment, why, let him have it!"

"Ludovick, you are not talking like yourself," Hugh said. "I wish to goodness we could find Alison; and if

once you saw that she wasn't being ill-treated, you wouldn't have such a fierce desire for vengeance."

"But she *has* been ill-treated: and is no one to suffer for that?" the other demanded.

"At all events it is not for you, in the position you hold with regard to this old man, it is not for you to put the law in motion, and get him thrown into jail. I tell you it is not right," Hugh continued, with some emphasis. "It it not right; and if you do it, you will regret it as long as ever you live."

But even Hugh was puzzled to say what should be done, in face of the fact that despite all their search and inquiry they could find no trace whatsoever of Mrs. Cowan and her ward. On the very next day, as it happened, Ludovick encountered Alison's sister Agnes, as he was walking along the unfrequented thoroughfare overlooking the canal and certain large iron-works. He was startled to see how ill the girl looked; and he might probably have passed her without recognition, had he not got into the habit of scanning eagerly every face he saw, even at a distance. When Agnes perceived who this stranger was, she started back in affright, and no doubt would have sought to avoid him, but that he intercepted her.

"Miss Agnes!" he said, as a sort of appeal.

"I—I should not speak to you," answered the girl, whose pale face was now paler than ever, and whose large and wistful eyes were like those of some startled wild animal.

"But you will speak to me—for Alison's sake!" he said. "Tell me where she is! That is all I want to know—it is not much for you to say!"

She glanced backward along the road; there was no one there but some children playing.

"If I knew, I would tell you, indeed I would," she said, at once hurriedly and piteously. "Oh, Captain Macdonell, it is terrible to have Alison away like that—as if she were

dead. Her name is never mentioned; the letters you sent her are lying there unopened; I don't know where she is; and I dare not ask. And then it is so hopeless. If she were to come back, it would only be worse. You know how gentle and kind Alison always is; but she has a great deal of firmness, too, when she thinks she is in the right. And nothing will make her yield now: if she were to come back, she might be in the same house with my father, but they would not recognize each other; and I can look forward to nothing but misery——"

The girl's eyes filled with tears; for she was a sensitive, tremulous kind of creature; and she had been very fond of her sister.

"But why didn't Alison open my letters?" he demanded.

"They came after she left," was the answer. "She was sent away almost immediately—on the Monday morning after she had been prayed for in the church. Oh, it was terrible, her going away: I never saw my father look like that before—so stern and implacable: though he hardly said anything. It was Alison who spoke most; but she was quite quiet, though she was white as white; and she said that if he wished her to leave the house, she would go; and she would go wherever Mrs. Cowan chose to take her; but she said that as soon as you came for her, it was her husband she would obey, and no one else; and she would wait until you told her what you wished her to do——"

"She said that?" he exclaimed, quickly.

"Yes, indeed," Agnes made answer. "And although she was crying when she left the house, I know it is useless for Mrs. Cowan to think she will talk her over. When Alison sees a thing clearly, and knows it to be right, nothing will make her yield about it; and if you were to go to her, Captain Macdonell, she would do what you asked her to do, because she said she would obey her husband;

but it is hopeless for Mrs. Cowan to think she will persuade her into anything else—yes, and that's why it is useless and hopeless to bring her back to Kirk o' Shields——"

"Then she is not in Kirk o' Shields?" he interposed suddenly.

"I don't know," Agnes said, with the most obvious simplicity and sincerity—in truth, a more guileless face than that of this pale, delicate-looking, wistful-eyed girl could hardly be imagined. "Sometimes I think she cannot be, or some one would have seen her and told me. But her name is never mentioned in the house. It is just as if she were dead. Once or twice at family worship my father makes some reference that you might fancy applied to Alison; but that is only part of what he may be thinking himself; he says nothing openly; and it's just as if she had never been in the house at all."

"And you have not the slightest idea where she is?" he asked again.

"No," said she rather sadly, "none. But you—now you have come here—don't you think you will be able to find her?"

"Oh, I will find her," said he, with something more than confidence in his tone. "I may have an unpleasant duty to perform as a preliminary step; but I will undertake to find her."

"And when you do, Captain Macdonell, you will let me know?—you will tell me that Ailie is well—and—and perhaps a little happier than when she went away from us? If you knew what it has been to me to see all this trouble, and not to be able to help; and now I am quite alone; and I dare not mention her name. Ailie and I were always such close companions——"

She stopped, for her lips were tremulous.

"Oh, I'll find her out," never fear, he said in a more gentle way, "and you shall be the first to know, depend

on that. Alison herself will write to you; and when you hear from her you may be sure she is no longer in any kind of captivity, or being lectured or preached at in any way whatsoever."

"Good-bye," she said; and she would have gone on so, but that he remonstrated with her.

"Won't you shake hands with me?"

Somewhat timidly the girl gave this dangerous person, this Roman Catholic, her hand; and then she so far overcame her shyness as to raise her eyes for a moment.

"Be kind to Ailie," she said—these were her parting words as she turned and went hurriedly away.

It was with no little exultation that Ludovick now hastened back to the inn, where he found Hugh just arrived from the fruitless watchings and wanderings of the morning; and eagerly, as they sat over their frugal midday meal, he told his friend the story of this interview with Agnes, and its revelations. And now he was grown impatient of their amateur-detective work; he would forthwith go through to Edinburgh and put the case, under this new light, before Balwhinnan, who would advise him what to do next. Moreover, he no longer spoke of vengeance; he was only anxious to release Alison from captivity; and what he insisted on was that if the courts were put in motion, and Mr. Blair summoned as a witness, the old Minister would say where Alison was as a matter of course, for the simple reason that he must know, after Alison's declaration, that detaining her under any kind of guardianship was absolutely useless. But Hugh warmly protested.

"Depend on this, Ludovick, that he will not be affected by any considerations of that kind. He will refuse to be a party to handing his daughter over to a Roman Catholic; and he will suffer anything rather than yield. What will be the result? The court must punish him for contempt,

to uphold its own dignity: you will have sent him to prison whether you intended it or not. And I tell you you will be sorry—sorrier than you think now. Why should you do such a thing? You don't imagine, after what Agnes has said, that Alison is being ill-treated; and you don't call out for vengeance on account of what she has suffered. Very well, let us take peacefuller means; and don't send that old man to prison! Let us go to Edinburgh and get a couple of professional detectives, if you like. But not till to-morrow. I have my eye on a house in Coatbridge Street that that divinity student fellow has called at twice during the last three days, and there is a backyard to it, with a high stone-wall round it, where a couple of prisoners might easily get a little exercise unseen. I still think Mr. Balwhinnan was right, and that you'll find Mrs. Cowan is not so far away. Wait till to-morrow in any case; and then we can go to Edinburgh and see about getting some professional help."

However, as it chanced, it was no professional detective who discovered a clue to the whereabouts of Mrs. Cowan and Alison: it was the lad John. Johnny, on this same afternoon, was as usual prowling about the neighbourhood of Corbieslaw, but quite carelessly now, for he had become convinced that Mrs. Cowan and Alison were not at the farm. And Johnny was angry that he had spent so much time for nothing; for Ludovick Macdonell, in order to render him diligent, had said something encouraging about his astuteness; and Johnny did not like the idea of going back to Lochaber a confessed failure. On this particular evening, towards dusk, he happened to observe, at a considerable distance, the figure of the "stickit minister," who was coming along the road towards the farm; and by some lucky accident, some flash of inspiration, a daring design sprung into Johnny's brain. The fields in this part of the country are divided from the highway, not by

hedges, but by big solid stone-walls, the gate in which is made of strips of iron. Johnny instantly went and opened one of these gates just so far as to let himself through; and there he crouched down behind the wall and waited in the gathering dusk for the coming of the probationer. The Rev. James Cowan, dreaming of no harm—dreaming, perhaps, of the brighter days in store for him when he should be released from the baleful tyranny of his father, and set up in an establishment of his own in Edinburgh, with Alison as his house-mistress, and this congregation and that vying with each other as to the earnestness of their "call" to him—the Rev. James Cowan came along the black pathway, and passed the partly opened gate without thought of harm. But hardly had he passed when Johnny, issuing from his concealment, followed with one or two swift and stealthy steps, and then with a sudden, startling cry, sprang like a wild-cat on the shoulders of the hapless probationer, hurling him forward, prone, on the pathway, and pinning him face downward with a grip of two muscular hands on his throat.

"*Heeg-a-neesh!—heeg-a-neesh!*" * he yelled, while the luckless minister, frightened out of his wits, in vain attempted to free himself from this horrible incubus. "The Duffle is on you!—the big Duffle is on you!—tell me now where Miss Alison is—where is she?—tell me now, or the Duffle, the Duffle will hef your head off!"

Again and again the captive strove to cast off this terrible unknown thing that had seized him; but the weakly, white-faced, ill-made probationer was no match for this heavy-shouldered demon of a lad, whose hands were as hard as iron with rowing. To save himself from actual strangulation, the black-coated youth gasped out—

"She—she's in Portobello."

"What place is that?" Johnny cried, with ferocious

* "*Thig-a-nis!*"—Come along, now!

determination. "Tell me again now, or the Duffle will hef your head off !—the Duffle, the Duffle hass you !—tell me again—what place is it ? "

"Port — Portobello ! " the probationer managed to ejaculate, as well as Johnny's iron fingers would allow him —and the next moment he found himself free.

But long before the bewildered and stupefied minister could pull himself together, Master Johnny was flying down the road towards Kirk o' Shields, shrieking with eldritch laughter, and calling aloud from time to time the talismanic word in his wild delight.

"Portobello !—aw, it's Portobello, uss it; and a fine name too ! Aw, a fine name that ! And what will Macdonell say now ? Cosh, that fellow's aweh hom ; and he's thinking the big Duffle wass on his back; but Macdonell will be giffing me something for this night's work. Portobello !—aw, Cosh, it's a fine place, Portobello, if I will be getting any money for it ! Go aweh hom, you black-cotted fellow, and tell them what the Duffle wass doing to you in the middle of the rod ! Hurrah, now, and another hurrah !—there wass no one could find it out but myself; and the Duffle was a good friend to me this night ! "

CHAPTER XXII.

A BATTLE ROYAL.

LUDOVICK MACDONELL had of course heard of Portobello, but he had never been there, nor had Hugh; and both of them, imagining it to be merely an ordinary small sea-side village, thought they would have no difficulty in finding Alison and carrying her off from her temporary jailer. So, when they went through to Edinburgh, they did not think of going to see Mr. Balwhinnan; they were in too great a hurry; they left their things at the hotel where Macdonell was known; they hired an open fly that happened to be coming along Prince's Street at the moment; and by-and-by they found themselves rattling through the rather melancholy eastern suburbs of the city, and out into the pallid semblance of the country that was all vague and dismal under the haze of a north-east wind.

But when they drew near to Portobello, and when they had got through the smoke of its outlying potteries and gas-works, and entered the old-fashioned, Scotch-looking town, and still more when they left the fly behind them, and walked down to the sea-front, and found the long extent of brown sand literally swarming with holiday-makers, mostly women and children, they perceived that this was a far bigger place than they had bargained for, and that their task was not to be so extremely simple. Macdonell had looked with intensest interest as they passed at each of those little villas, with its front of

black-gray stone and small garden; for any one of them might hold the prisoner he was come to liberate; and it was strange to think that perhaps this or that door was the only thing that intervened between him and Alison. But when they got down to the beach, the sight of the big modern houses and the swarming population rather chilled his eager hopes; and when they walked out the pier—which seemed a kind of fashionable promenade—he grew familiar with disappointment, as stranger after stranger came nearer, and passed by unheeded. Nor was the day one to exhilarate the spirits and cheer him with fond anticipations. The bleak north-easter had brought mist with it, so that Inchkeith rock was just visible and no more; but the wind was not strong enough to raise anything of a sea, and the wide waste of desolate gray water lapped languidly into the shore, where it took a tinge of muddy brown from the sand. The flashing blue waves, the silver-gleaming clouds, the wild rain of the west had no place here; everything was gray and cold and dull; it seemed impossible to him that Alison should be anywhere in this nebulous, fluctuating, uninteresting throng.

"Oh, don't be so hopeless all at once!" Hugh said to him. "That is only a first impression. It won't be so difficult; we must find her, now that we know where she is. Johnny," he said, turning to the lad, who was but a step behind them, "you don't suppose the stickit minister was playing a trick on you when he said Portobello?"

"Uss it a trick?" said Johnny, brightening up at once. "Cosh, there wass no trick in his head when he thought the Duffle wass on his shoulders! Ay, and he's thinking that now, I'm sure, and it will be a fine thing for him to tell them from the pulpit—that he wass fighting with the Duffle in the middle of the rod!"

Hugh turned to his companion.

"What we have to do is this," said he, "we must take rooms in that small hotel we passed, and have our things sent down from Edinburgh. You know now all that you want to know; Alison is here; and she is ready to go with you whenever you ask her to do that. Of course we must see her sooner or later walking about, or coming out of a house, or going into one: and we must have a fly waiting in readiness at the hotel, so that she may be taken away with as little fuss as possible. There will be a fuss, no doubt, if Mrs. Cowan is with her at the time—there will be a mighty row, in fact; for although she can't prevent your taking Alison away, she can make a scene, and give you a bit of her mind. You'll get the worst of that, Ludovick," he continued, with rather a grim smile. "You'll decidedly get the worst of that; if I were you, I wouldn't say a word. By George, I'd give something to have Aunt Gilchrist here just at that moment; then you'd see the fur fly! I'd back the Highland bantam to make a poor thing of the Southerner—unless, indeed, Mrs. Cowan went on the other tack, and began to whine. She won't whine with you, Ludovick, you may be sure; you will have it served up hot and hot."

"I am not likely to mind that much," Ludovick said indifferently, "if once I had got hold of Alison. But the worst of it is that we haven't the slightest idea what this woman Cowan is like; we might meet her half a dozen times without knowing it; our only chance is to find Alison herself."

"And of course we shall find her," Hugh said instantly (for he was always afraid of Macdonell returning to his project of appealing to the law, and compelling the old Minister to speak, or else to go to jail). "This isn't like an ordinary town; they are sure to come out for a walk, and they are sure to stroll along the sea-front, or out this pier. Now let us have a distinct understanding; if you

can get clear away with Alison, you put her in the cab, and drive off with her to Edinburgh; if there's any row, leave Johnny and me to see it out. Once you've put Alison under Mrs. Balwhinnan's care—that's the proposal, isn't it?—there will be no chance of further trouble; you won't catch Mrs. Cowan hammering at an advocate's door and screaming for the police. She must know well enough that you have the law on your side; I don't believe she's half the ignorant person you seem to think her. And here is Johnny all impatience to begin a search of the town; you're determined to win that gun, aren't you, Johnny?"

"I wass thinking that if Miss Alison uss in this place, I will be finding her before long," observed Johnny, who was rather giving himself airs now since his exploit on the highway.

"If you do," Ludovick said to this heavy, lumbering, shrewd-eyed lad, "I'll not only give you the gun, but you may come out from time to time to Oyre, and if you find any hoodie-crows along the rocks, I'll give you a shilling for every one you kill."

"A shullin?" said John quickly.

"Yes."

"And mebbe you'll be for giffing me a few cartridges," said John insidiously.

"Oh yes, I'll give you a few cartridges, now and again, but not to be fired away in the air, or at marks. You'll have to stalk the hoodie-crows, for they're precious cunning, and when you get at one of the brutes, you shoot him sitting, mind that, or anyhow you can manage it."

"Well, he may be cunning," said John reflectively, "but mebbe there's other folk chist as cunning as him. I've catched a snail by the horns before now—though I could not throw the little duffle over my shoulder."

And indeed, as it turned out, it was Johnny's proud

privilege to secure that precious gun, and that in a far more simple way than any one of them had hoped for. Ludovick and Hugh were walking back through the town towards the hotel which has been mentioned, when Johnny, who was lingering behind them somewhat, suddenly saw a face present itself at the window of one of the small villas they were passing, and then there was a quick rapping on the framework, and also, as he thought, a half-stifled cry. Instantly he called to the two in front of him.

"Here!—here!—Mr. Hugh!"

They wheeled round. But Johnny could say nothing; he was frightened; he was staring at the window which was now quite empty. And then—it all seemed to happen in one brief bewildering second—the door of the house was thrown open, and there stood Alison, rose-red, and smiling, and yet with anxious and pleading eyes. Ludovick was up the steps and by her side in a moment, and holding her by both hands.

"Have you come for me, Ludovick?—are you going to take me away with you?" she said; but the proud and glad light that shone in her eyes showed that she knew what his answer would be.

"Indeed, I have come for you," said he, and he drew her a little way into the passage. It seemed a wonderful thing to see Alison's face upturned to his again, and her soft eyes all radiant, and her lips smiling: this was not the tear-worn Alison he had been thinking of; this was rather the happy bride, rose-red and shy, and yet blithe of look, who had come sailing away with him on board the steamer. "And I'm going to take you away with me, you may be sure of that,—now, this very minute. But what are you doing in this place, Alison? What brought you here? When you left your father's house, why didn't you come straight through to the Highlands?

"Ludovick," said she, with her eyes cast down, "how could I do that—unasked?"

"Then why didn't you write to me?"

"Wouldn't that have been just about the same thing?" she said gently; and then she looked up again—trustful and confident. "But I knew you would come for me, Ludovick!"

"Yes, I've had a long search for you, Alison; but now I've found you I don't mean to lose sight of you any more. You must come away at once. I suppose Mrs. Cowan is not in the house?"

"She went out only a few minutes ago, but she may be back again directly," Alison said, with some apprehension appearing on her face. "Shall I go and get my things ready, Ludovick? I—I would rather be away before she came back."

"Oh, as for that," said he, "it is of no consequence to me if there were fifteen dozen of Mrs. Cowans in the house: you are coming away with me, and that is all about it. But we may as well get you away quietly if we can. I see Hugh has disappeared: he is off to get a cab, I know, and he will be back presently. And here is Johnny; you go and get your portmanteau ready, Alison, and Johnny will be waiting to carry it down to the fly."

She hurried away at once; and then Ludovick called to Johnny, who came up the steps grinning with satisfaction, for now he knew the gun was secured, likewise the cartridges, and the stalking of hoodie-crows.

"Look here, Johnny," said he, "you go along and stand at the foot of that stair. There will be a portmanteau for you to fetch down from the room above, and you will have to carry it out to the cab when it comes. Mind you don't let any one interfere with you."

"Cosh, will there be a fight?" exclaimed Johnny, with eager and delighted eyes.

"Of course not. Only, don't let any one stop you. Drive you right through and get the portmanteau out and into the cab."

Presently an open fly was driven up, and here was Hugh, very anxious and excited.

"Isn't she ready? Isn't she ready?" he said breathlessly.

"There's no such great hurry," Macdonell said quite calmly. "Even if my amiable friend Mrs. Cowan turns up, what can she do?"

"You don't know what she mayn't do. She has the tremendous advantage of being a woman. If there's any kind of a difficulty, you can't knock her out of the way as you might a man. However, if Alison would only look sharp, it will be all right. What a lucky chance it is!"

Indeed, all was going well; for now they heard Alison calling Johnny to come and get down the portmanteau. Moreover, a domestic who had been summoned from some back region by this unusual commotion, having stood and gazed at these strangers for a second or two, quietly retired again: she evidently thought it was none of her business. But alas! as ill fate would have it, just as it seemed probable they were going to get easily and freely away, Mrs. Cowan appeared upon the scene; and she had not even entered the house when she seemed to divine what was going on.

"Hoity, toity, what's this now?" she exclaimed, with eyes sparkling with anger; and she confronted Ludovick and Hugh in the lobby. All her cringing and servile suavity was gone now; she saw the position clearly enough; she knew that if once the girl was allowed to leave the house, then farewell to all the fond mother's hopes about the poor probationer and his prospects; this was her last chance, and she was prepared to do battle for

it. "Here's impudence!" she cried. "I'd just like to know what ye're doing in a respectable woman's house! Well, I declare——"

"I have come to take away my wife," Ludovick said politely enough, "if that is what you want to know."

"Oh, it's you, then," she said, with rather panting expression—for the crisis had found her unprepared with sufficiently cutting phrases—"it's you, then, that led astray that poor girl, and would have made a Roman of her, and a Jezebel, and—and—worse. But you've not done it yet; and you'll not do it; for we've the law on our side; and not a foot will she stir out o' this house, or my name's no Cowan."

"I'm sure I don't know what your name is," Macdonell said, "and I don't care very much; but my wife is going away with me—now—this minute."

"She's not!—she's not!" the woman cried fiercely—for the sight of Johnny bringing the portmanteau downstairs seemed to drive her frantic. "I'll have the law; I'll bring a policeman; you're stealing these things—you're stealing them! She's under my charge; I'll no have her carried off by a gang o' Roman Catholics and thieves!"

At this moment Alison appeared, and Mrs. Cowan instantly turned to face her—barring her way, indeed.

"I dare ye to leave this house!" she cried. "Ye're the daughter of an honest, God-fearing man, and I dare ye to go forth and bring shame on him and his house and his congregation!"

"Let me pass, Mrs. Cowan," said Alison, who was very pale.

"I will not—I will not!" this infuriated person cried. "Ye're under my charge; out o' this house ye'll not budge one step. I'll take ye back to your room myself——"

"If you lay a hand on her," Ludovick said—and his eyes were beginning to flash fire now—"it will be the worst day for you you ever encountered in your life!"

But she was not to be intimidated.

"Back to your room, miss!" she said; and she seized the girl by the wrist.

Well, here an extraordinary thing occurred. Johnny, by some mischance, happened at this very moment to trip over the portmanteau which was lying in the lobby, and he fell forward against Mrs. Cowan—fell forward, indeed, with such violence and weight that she was sent staggering against the parlour door, which yielded, so that she stumbled backward into the room, while the heavy-shouldered lad, carried on by the impetus of his fall, rolled in after her. Instantly there was a frightful shrieking and scrimmage; but Hugh clapped to the door, and held the handle.

"Quick now, Ludovick! whip up the portmanteau, and be off with you! Get into the cab, Alison! Leave Johnny and me to come along afterwards: look sharp—or she'll have him killed!"

Ludovick with his powerful arms seized the portmanteau, carried it down the steps and across the pavement, and swung it up to the driver; he opened the door and helped Alison into the fly; then they drove away, and Hugh waited until they were well out of sight. Just as they disappeared round a distant corner, Ludovick looked back and waved his hand: he was laughing—doubtless over Johnny's achievement; but Alison, Hugh could perceive, still seemed frightened and was very pale. Then he thought it was time for him to open the parlour door, and see what was going on within.

But the battle raged no longer. The combatants were exhausted. Mrs. Cowan had thrown herself on the sofa, her face downward on the cushion, and she was sobbing

hysterically; while her dress was in dire disarray. Johnny, on the other hand, stood erect, irate, and vengeful, regarding his enemy with lowering eyes; but he too was in woful plight—his collar hanging from his neck, his waistcoat torn open, and blood streaming profusely from two terrible scratches that extended from his right temple all down the side of his face.

"Come away, Johnny—come away!" his master said to him.

But Johnny lingered.

"I wass giffing that tammed —— something she will remember," he said between his teeth, as he still regarded his prostrate foe. "Does she want any more?"

There was no response from the sobbing and dishevelled figure on the sofa.

"Come away, John, I tell you!"

But even when he had in a fashion dragged him out of the house, Hugh could not induce Johnny to go any farther.

"That tammed ——," he said sullenly as he was mopping his face with his handkerchief, "she had her nails in my neck. I'm not going back to Edinburgh just yet, Mr. Hugh; I know the weh there ferry well. I'm going to stay here until it is dark; and when it is dark I will go back. She's an' ahfu' woman, that; but, by Cosh, I wass giffing her something!"

"What on earth do you want to stay here till it is dark for?" Hugh demanded, with some impatience.

"I want to bash the windows with stons," said Johnny, gloomily regarding the house.

"Yes, and get locked up in the police-office!"

"That is no matter," was all that John said.

Eventually, however, he was forced to come away with Hugh: and when they caught a tramway car, and got on the top of the same, Hugh set to work magnanimously to

convince John that he had not fared worst in that fell duel.

"But just remember this, Johnny," Hugh Munro said to this extremely disreputable-looking lad, whose torn collar could not be made to come together again. "Consider what you've done. You've broken into a house, and carried off a portmanteau, and let a minister's daughter run away, and committed assault and battery, and I don't know what else. You'll be very well out of it if you get safely back to Lochaber. What would you say now if you were taken before a judge in Edinburgh—a terrible person in a big white wig and silk robes—and if you were charged before him, what would you say?"

"Well," said Johnny, with the most imperturbable coolness, "I would tell him I wass giffing that tammed —— as much as she was giffing me; and if he did not like the answer, I would tell him to do what wass his pleasure. For you know what they say in the Gaelic, Mr. Hugh—'*Is coma leis an righ Dùghall, is coma le Dùghall co dhùibh.*'" *

* "The King hates Dugald, but Dugald does not care a straw for that."

CHAPTER XXIII.

AGNES.

WHAT strangely unexpected strands appear in this web of life we weave from day to day. When Alison Macdonell was walking through the luxuriant gardens of Monaco, between branching palm and towering cactus, and looking down the steep cliffs to the intense opaque blue of the Mediterranean Sea basking in the noonday sun, her thoughts would go wandering away back to the grimy little Scotch town, with its rain, its squalid streets and smoke-laden skies; when she stood in the mysterious dusk of Milan Cathedral, and beheld the enthroned cardinals in their robes of purple and red, and listened to the distant sound of trumpet and viol and bassoon leading the hushed invisible choir, she would think (and with no kind of disrespect or contempt) of the bare walls and cold pews of East Street Church, and of the harsh voices of men singing, "Be merciful to me, O God" to the melancholy strains of "Coleshill" or "Bangor;" and even with her young husband by her side, laughing, talking, proud of her, assiduous in his devotion to her, and studying her every wish with a constant kindness, her heart would turn with a sort of piteous longing for reconciliation to the stern old man who had shut the door of his house upon her for ever. Ludovick did not seek to argue her out of these wistful regrets, though sometimes he good-naturedly remonstrated.

"Look here, Ailie," he would say, but very gently,

"each person has to go his or her own way in the world; and I think, after you have got back to Lochaber, and are settled down there, and have got acquainted with the many families who will be delighted to become your friends, I think you will find yourself leading a far more wholesome and natural life than ever you did in Kirk o' Shields. Of course, if your father were disposed to make it up with us, I should be very glad. I should be very glad for several reasons; among them, I should like to have your sister Agnes come often to stay with us at Oyre. But if he won't relent, then obstinacy and bigotry must simply be allowed to go their own way—as we go ours."

"Yes, Ludovick," she would say submissively; and she would strive to be wholly engrossed with the various details and experiences of their travelling, though he came to the conclusion that time alone would effectually clear away these sad fancies, these unspoken regrets, from her mind.

However, when they did eventually return home to Fort William and to Oyre House, the general welcome that awaited the young bride (which involved them in a series of visits, oftentimes to distant parts of the country), and the new and unfamiliar duties devolving upon Alison herself, were of themselves a fortunate distraction. Armed as she was with a tolerable notion of housekeeping, she had much to learn in this extended sphere; and she was in many ways a shifty and business-like young person, who had early acquired a sense of responsibility; so that Ludovick used laughingly to declare that Aunt Gilchrist's "bit lady" was developing into a solemn and awful *châtelaine*, who ought to go about in stiff black satin, with the keys of an *oubliette* dangling from her girdle. But Alison was exceedingly proud when the success of this or the other modest little festivity at

Oyre called forth gentle and polished but none the less sincere praises from the old laird, who, indeed, was now so given to talking of his daughter-in-law wherever he went, and of her beautiful nature, her affectionate disposition, her persuasive ways, her simplicity, and self-possession, and charm of manner, that he had hardly any time left for his Indian stories. And then again, if Alison had fallen in love with the West Highlands in the summer-time, consider what she thought of them in the gorgeous hues of late October. In summer, the West Highlands, when they are not darkened by purple rain-storms from the west, become faint and ethereal in the haze produced by fine weather; the mountains recede behind a veil, as it were, through which you can see the pale lilac-grays and rose-grays of their lofty peaks and shoulders, with the shadows traced in lightest blue; but in the colder and clearer atmosphere of late October, when the brackens of the lower slopes have turned to orange, and the bent-grass of the higher slopes has withered, the hills come startlingly near, and are of a solid russet-red, with every corrie and watercourse sharply marked in deep cobalt; while as the afternoon wanes, and the skies richen in intensity, the wide calm stretch of sea becomes a lake of crimson fire. With these splendours before her, Alison could not always be thinking of Kirk o' Shields.

Aunt Gilchrist, who tarried long in Fort William this autumn, apparently for no other reason than to catch an occasional glimpse of her bit lady, whom she had befriended in a most substantial manner—Aunt Gilchrist, it was observed, would never come near Oyre House when there were any strangers or any formal dinner-party there. She affected to be a little shy. If Hugh and Flora only were going out to have an afternoon game of tennis and to spend the evening, she would sometimes acccompany

them; and she had struck up a great friendship with Mr. Macdonell; but she kept away from Alison's new set of acquaintances. She said she was just a foolish old Scotch-woman (which was not true, for she was Highland to the back-bone) who had so long been accustomed to have her own way in her own small circle, that she did not care to go among strangers; and when Ludovick teased her by saying he knew why she would not accept these invitations —that it was because, after her goodness to Alison, she did not wish to come forward publicly to exact too much of their humble devotion and homage—she would answer significantly—

"I've seen more o' the world than you, young sir; and when I promised my dear that she would go properly provided to Oyre House—that I would come and be a mother-in-law to you whenever you wanted me—I knew at the same time that a mother-in-law has to be discreet in her visits. I've done nothing for my bit lady but what I said I would; ye're not obleeged to me the least thing; I'm happy enough when I hear her drive up to the gate and when I look out and see her blithe face coming through the garden."

The fact was that just at this time Aunt Gilchrist's chief companion was John. The little old dame betrayed a most unholy joy in hearing the minutest details of the encounter between John and Mrs. Cowan; she laughed aloud at the picture of her adversary's overthrow; she spurred on Johnny's imagination until his recital, elaborated day after day, rose to epic heights. At first John had been chary of bragging. Despite all his nonchalance, there remained with him some dim vision (conjured up by Hugh's warning) of an Edinburgh judge, sitting in awful court, and with knit brows inquiring into the story of the Portobello outrage. But at home here in Lochaber he grew to disregard these vague terrors; and the more Aunt Gil-

christ—chuckling, crowing, making merry over the downfall of her direst enemy—the more Aunt Gilchrist encouraged him, the more did John, with his small eyes twinkling, and his large mouth grinning, add vivid particulars to his description of the fray. He took no shame to him that his victory had been obtained over a woman. Have not other heroes been in the like case? Did not the famous and valiant Siegfried strive with and overcome that "devil's-wife," the fierce Brunehild? The *Portobello-Lied* grew in proportions, until, from being the mere account of a cockatoo-and-monkey scrimmage, it became a great heroic poem, something that seemed to demand a lamenting or joyful chorus at the end of its several parts. And the first thing that caused Johnny to rise to these altitudes of invention was his inquiry about the probable cost of Mrs. Cowan's bonnet.

"Well, mem," he said to Aunt Gilchrist, while as yet the chant of triumph was in embryo, "when she put her nails into the back of my neck, I had a grup of her too; and if she tore my collar, well, I pulled her bonnet in pieces, and what is more as that, mem, when it came off all her front hair came off too—— "

"That was false hair, Johnny, I'll be bound," said Aunt Gilchrist, sniggering to herself. "So the plaits came off, did they?"

"Ay, but this is what I would like to know, now; I would like to know what she would be paying for that bonnet that I tore into bits?" Johnny asked. "Two shullins, mebbe?"

"Two shillings? what are you talking about!"

"Mebbe more as that? Mebbe seffen or echt shullins?" said Johnny eagerly. "Seffen or echt shullins?"

"More likely a pound, or five-and-twenty shillings!" answered Aunt Gilchrist—and she, too, was chuckling over the destruction of this piece of property.

"Five-and-twenty shullins!" exclaimed Johnny—awe-struck in the midst of his delight. "Five-and-twenty shullins!" And then he burst out laughing. "Aw, Cosh, that's a fine thing, now! Five-and-twenty shullins! That's a good story now as ever I wass hearing! Five-and-twenty shullins! I will be telling that story to Macdonell when I go out to get the gun he wass promising me."

Johnny not only got the gun and a moderate amount of cartridges, but also permission to shoot an occasional rabbit or two when the Munroes could let him go out to pay a visit to Oyre; and it was quite remarkable how many rabbits seemed to get in John's way. He entirely failed to find any hoodie-crows; but proud indeed was Johnny when he could present the young mistress of Oyre with two or three rabbits, their legs neatly tied together with a piece of string. He would not take them into the back premises and give them to the cook; he lay in wait for Alison; and she, knowing what this murderous youth most valued, made no scruple about going into her husband's gun-room and filching from the case another handful of cartridges which she surreptitiously conveyed to John. These two were excellent friends; but Johnny got no encouragement from her to relate and magnify his onslaught upon Mrs. Cowan: the *Portobello-Lied* was for Aunt Gilchrist's ears alone.

The flaming month of October burned itself out; Aunt Gilchrist had now gone away to the Rothesay Hydropathic Establishment, to settle herself there for the winter; and yet no message of any kind, no proffered word of conciliation, had come to Alison from the inexorable old man in Kirk-o' Shields. Agnes was her correspondent; and Agnes wrote frequently, saying smooth things and assuring her sister that in time her father would relent; but Alison could tell, even from these letters, that her name

was never mentioned, that in her old home she was as one dead and departed for ever. Mrs. Cowan was a good deal about the house, she learned. She had been instrumental in getting the servant-lass Jean dismissed—Jean having imprudently made some slighting remark about the length of the prayers at family worship; and Mrs. Cowan had brought down from Corbieslaw a girl to supply Jean's place, the new-comer being of a much more pious turn, though her godliness was more in evidence than her cleanliness. And every one of these letters wound up with the piteous hope that soon Alison might find some means of winning over her father from his rigid and austere isolation, showing how this gentle, nervous, sensitive creature Agnes was fretting about that unhappy estrangement.

Suddenly those letters ceased; and Alison, wondering, wrote again and again, without getting any answer. Then she became alarmed. She went to her husband, and asked him whether she might not write to Mrs. Cowan; and she probably would have done so had not a telegram arrived from Kirk o' Shields that confirmed her worst fears. She looked at it, breathless and dismayed. "*Your sister is seriously ill. She wishes to see you. Ebenezer Blair.*" She did not stay to consider that here was an intimation from her father that his house was again open to her; she was not thinking of herself at all; she was thinking only of the frail, delicate, wistful-eyed girl who had such a slight physique with which to combat any attack of disease. And when she hurriedly, and with rather a pale, frightened face, carried this telegram to her husband, she could not tell him all the anxious forebodings that were in her mind.

"You must go at once," Ludovick said, "and I will go with you. We will put up at the inn, so that we need not be in any one's way. Of course, Ailie," he added, "I

am very sorry your sister is ill; and I hope it may be only something temporary; but there's this to be said about it—it has made it easy for your father and you to become friends again. People forget bygones in the face of such a crisis. And I know you have been worrying and vexing yourself about it—far more than ever you would tell me; well, here is the beginning of a reconciliation. He himself asks you to go to the house; whereas he might have got Mrs. Cowan to send you the telegram—— "

"I do not care about that," she said sadly. "I'm afraid Agnes must be very ill."

And thus it was that Alison found herself once more in Kirk o' Shields, on the afternoon of a bleak and cold November day, just as the daylight, or what passes there for daylight, was falling into a sombre dusk. The people at the inn knew that the Minister's daughter was seriously ill. It was some kind of fever, they said. She had been prayed for in the church on the preceding Sabbath. But there was something in the guarded way they spoke that alarmed Alison more than their words.

Forthwith she walked hurriedly along to East Street and to her father's house, and was admitted by the new servant-girl, Ludovick accompanying her. When she went upstairs and entered her sister's room (which used to be her room, too) the gas was already lit; her father was standing talking in low tones to the doctor; Mrs. Cowan sat by the side of the bed; an open Bible lay on the small table. The moment she made her appearance, Mrs. Cowan rose and retired to the upper end of the room; and Alison went forward on tiptoe, and knelt down by the bedside. Apparently her sister was asleep—at least her eyes were closed; her face was pale and wan and sunken; she was breathing heavily, and with sometimes a kind of

shudder that seemed to pass through the wasted frame; and when Alison ever so gently put her hand on the back of her sister's hand, there was a cold clamminess there that struck a mortal dread to her heart.

At that slight touch the girl opened her eyes—languid they were, and anxious too, and almost frightened, but there was no fierce fire of fever in them, as Alison was rejoiced to perceive.

"Have you just come, Ailie?" she said, in a weak, uncertain voice, as if breathing were difficult to her. And then she said, with a kind of troubled look, "I thought you were here last night, Ailie, but—but sometimes I don't quite know the difference between dreaming and waking: my head is so strange. Is—is your husband here?"

"Yes, he is in the parlour," Alison said quickly. "Would you like to see him, Aggie?"

"Yes."

Alison went downstairs at once, and fetched Ludovick—who came forward to the bedside without paying heed to any one in the room. Curiously enough, at sight of him, the large, languid eyes of the sick girl filled with tears.

"Come nearer," she said.

He stooped down to listen.

"You'll be kind to Ailie!" she said, in a piteous kind of way.

"We all try to be as kind to her as we can," said he cheerfully. "But it is you who have got to be kind to her now: Ever since she came to Oyre, she has been wondering when you were coming to pay us a visit—a long, long visit, so that she can show you all the wonderful things in Lochaber. And that is what you have got to do now—you must make haste to get strong and well, and as soon as the doctor allows you, we'll see what the

change will do for you, and the Highland air, and Alison's nursing."

She only shook her head mournfully; and turned away from them; and once more closed the tired, heavy eyes.

Alison had thrown aside her bonnet and travelling-ulster on entering the house; and as Mrs. Cowan had now left the room, it seemed so natural that the elder sister of the patient should take the place of nurse that the doctor, before going, came forward to her, and in an undertone gave her directions as to what she should do. Down below he found Alison's husband in the parlour; and Macdonell, being anxious to hear all about the case, went outside with him, and walked some distance with him. The report he received was far from satisfactory. She had no strength of constitution to fight this nervous fever, the doctor said. She had been delirious several times. Though apparently she slept now and again, it was not real sleep; it was only a sort of dozing, during which her brain seemed to be racked by all kinds of terrors and visions. Ludovick asked him whether there was any immediate danger; and the doctor somewhat evasively admitted that he feared there was.

Meanwhile Alison had been left alone with her father in the hushed sick-chamber; and now the old man with the sad, worn face had drawn his chair in to the table, and was reading aloud in solemn, monotonous tones, the Thirty-eighth Psalm, that perchance some phrase of petition or confession or consolation might reach that troubled brain. "'O Lord, rebuke me not in thy wrath: neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure. For thine arrows stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth me sore. There is no soundness in my flesh because of thine anger; neither is there any rest in my bones because of my sin. For mine iniquities are gone over my head: as a heavy burden they are too heavy for me.'" And still more impressively he

read out the closing verses, as if he also were joining in this appeal for Divine pity and succour. "'Forsake me not, O Lord: O my God, be not far from me. Make haste to help me, O Lord my salvation.'"

In the silence that ensued, the sick girl began to murmur something, in an uneasy, broken, restless fashion; and Alison leaned over to hear what she was saying. It was all about herself, she found; it was Ailie this—Ailie that; and apparently Agnes was addressing some third person, who she fancied was with her. Who that was Alison soon discovered.

"Mother, mother," the girl said—and now there was a curious hectic flush on her face, and the palm of her hand was burning hot—"mother," she said, in those low and piteous tones, "you would not have let Ailie stand there crying if you could have come to her—you would have taken poor Ailie away—you would have brought her here, with us—we should have been all together. And—and if she was here now, I should not be afraid—Ailie was always the one to help me—but—but I am afraid—oh, don't take me forward, mother!—don't—don't—the Lord Jesus—on the White Throne—and the golden crown, and the sickle that is to reap when the time is come to reap—it will be all so terrible!—let me wait here, mother—hide me, hide me!—let me wait here, for Ailie! And you would have pitied her, mother—they were so cruel with her—and my father not speaking to her—and she was crying when she was in the church, and when she left the house. I looked up to the skies; I thought you would be crying, too, mother, when you looked down and saw poor Ailie, that was always your favourite; but there are no tears here—only those voices that are so far away; and I can see no one but you. No! no!—not yet!—don't lead me forward yet, mother!—I would rather wait for Ailie; and she will take the one hand, and you the other,

and I will go between you—and—and my eyes cast down—and perhaps the Lord Jesus will pity me, and not be angry. Mother, if only I had something to put at the foot of the Throne!—some flowers—but there were none when I came away—it was winter and everything was dark—there were none that I could bring with me. Will He be angry, mother, that I have brought nothing with me?"

"Hush, hush, Aggie!" the elder sister said, and she put her hand on the girl's burning forehead.

And then it was that she opened her eyes again—which were fixed and staring; and she tried to lift her poor, helpless arm as if she would point to what she saw before her.

"Look!—look!—the great white banner—and the red letters on it—do you see what it says, mother—'*For Sinners Slain*'—is He coming now? Is He coming this way, mother? Oh, look at the thousands and thousands of them, all robed in white, and singing—don't you hear them, mother?—it's Helmsley they're singing—'Lo, He comes with clouds descending, once for favoured sinners slain'—listen, mother—it's Helmsley they're singing—'Thousand, thousand saints attending, swell the triumph of His train'—was it singing like this that Ailie heard—in the cathedral somewhere?"

"Hush, dear, hush!" Alison said soothingly, and she moistened the parched lips with the cooling drink that stood by.

The younger sister turned her glazed, staring eyes upon Alison, and seemed to recognize her—but as part of this rapt vision.

"Have you come, Ailie?" she said, in a low, hurried voice. "Do you see them?—do you see them there?—mother has gone away—she will be back—she has gone to tell them why I had nothing to put at the foot of the

White Throne—she knew I was frightened. For it is all so different now, so different! Once He said 'Suffer the little children to come unto me'; but that was when He was a poor man, living among poor people; now He is the King of Glory, the Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. 'Feed my lambs,' He said; but that was long ago; and He has forgotten now. Now He is the King of Glory—and the everlasting gates are opened before Him—oh, Ailie, He is coming!—give me your hand, quick, quick!—and be still—be still—maybe He will remember what He said once—maybe He will pity us and not be angry—I can—see—mother—pleading for us——"

She turned away with a wearied sigh; she closed her eyelids and lay breathing heavily. And then in the silence arose the solemn tones of the Minister's voice—

"'I will bless the Lord at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul shall make her boast in the Lord: the humble shall hear thereof, and be glad. O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together. I sought the Lord, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears.'"

So the slow hours went by; and Alison sat there, patient and assiduous in her ministrations, and watching the strange fluctuations from burning heat to shuddering cold that marked the progress of the fever. There was no recurrence of violent delirium; but sometimes the girl would moan and mutter to herself, in a voice so low as to be almost inaudible. It was clear that she was not asleep; it was mere exhaustion that kept her eyes closed.

Towards midnight the old servant Margaret came up and whispered that she had prepared some food for Alison, and that she would take her place at the bedside (for Mrs. Cowan had gone home for the present). When Alison went down to the parlour, she found her husband still there; and she begged him to go back to the inn; but he

refused to do that; he said he could pass the night very well in the arm-chair, and preferred to remain in case he should be wanted. He did not tell her what the doctor had said.

The long night passed, slowly and wearifully; the bleak, gray morning broke over the squalid little town; and the wan light entering by the window showed hardly any change in the condition of the sick girl, who, indeed, had fallen into a kind of stupor, taking no heed of anything, and suffering no longer from these delirious attacks. It was a lethargy of exhaustion; the fever had burned up the vitality of the delicate constitution; she lay in a sort of coma, as if asleep, but not asleep. When the doctor came, he looked grave and anxious; and he said a few words to the Minister out of Alison's hearing. He called two or three times during the day; and he hardly strove to conceal his fear that his patient was slipping away from under his hands.

Towards nightfall it was evident to everybody that she was sinking fast. Alison, Mrs. Cowan, and the Minister were in the room; the servants were in the passage outside; Mr. Cowan, Ludovick Macdonell, and one or two relatives were in the parlour below, waiting to be summoned. And in the silence of the sick-chamber there was only the monotonous, mournful sound of the Minister's voice. He was walking up and down, repeating in slow and measured and earnest tones verse after verse of Scripture, that perhaps the dying girl might overhear:

"'For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept.'"

And then again would come a pause of dreadful stillness, in which the poor woman Margaret could be heard sobbing in the passage without. But there was no faltering of the Minister's voice, no trace of emotion in the stern, sad face.

"'If a man die, shall he live again? all the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come. Thou shalt call, and I will answer thee: thou wilt have a desire to the work of thine hands.'

* * * * *

"'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.'

* * * * *

"'Hear my prayer, O Lord, and let my cry come unto thee. Hide not thy face from me in the day when I am in trouble; incline thine ear unto me: in the day when I call answer me speedily. For my days are consumed like smoke, and my bones are burned as a hearth. My heart is smitten, and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread.'

* * * * *

"'Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters; and he that hath no money, come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. . . . Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David.'"

He repeated that last phrase again and again, so that she *must* overhear: "'I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David.'

* * * * *

"'Thus saith the Lord; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because

they were not. Thus saith the Lord; Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the Lord.'"

And surely it was to lend her courage on her entrance into the dark valley, that his voice now became even more solemn and strenuous—

"So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.'"

Here there was a longer pause, and Agnes opened her eyes and looked languidly around, as if seeking some one. Alison instantly bent down towards her.

"What is it, dear?"

Her eyes were still looking wearily for what she could not find.

"Where—is—he?" she asked.

"Do you mean Ludovick?" Alison said—and her sister's eyes plainly answered yes.

She went hastily downstairs and brought Ludovick up and into the room. When he came to the bedside, he instinctively took the dying girl's hand in his, for she was too weak to raise it. And then she seemed to try to say something—but was unable.

"I know," said he, stooping over her, "I know what you wish to say to me. It is what you said last night. And you want me to make a promise? Well, then, I do; you need not be afraid!"

Her last look was directed towards his eyes; and it was a look of gratitude and kindness, of assurance and peace. He was still holding her hand when the change came;

and the gentle, loving spirit passed quite quietly away, almost without a struggle.

It was the strong, resonant voice of the Minister that broke the hushed silence.

"Let us give praise to the Most High that He has seen fit to take another lamb into His fold."

And when he knelt down, and as the others knelt down —the two servants having come unbidden into the room— if the women were sobbing and crying, no tremor of emotion broke the clear tones of this old man's declaration of his acquiescence in the Divine will. What to him were the sorrows of this transitory life but as snow-flakes beating against the impregnable armour of his faith in the heavenly wisdom and mercy? Nay, this was no supplication, but rather a strenuous resignation. She who had been taken from them had been spared the trials and temptations and afflictions of years, and had entered early into the joy of her Lord. Why should we mourn, he said (almost as if addressing these grief-stricken relatives and friends), that she had won to her eternal rest a little while before others who had still to toil and fret in these earthly bonds, until the happy moment of their release should come? Death had been conquered; their young kinswoman had been raised to everlasting life; to God be all the praise! It was a devout and sincere thanksgiving that the Minister poured forth, in measured, earnest, impressive sentences; but perhaps they had not all attained to his lofty and resolute disregard of the sufferings and tribulations of this brief moment of human existence; indeed, when the news got bruited abroad that night, there was more than one sad heart in the town, for the gentle, affectionate, frail-constitutioned girl had made many friends, even in this austere Kirk o' Shields.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOMEWARD.

Of course Ludovick and Alison had to wait for the funeral; but he did not choose that she should remain in Kirk o' Shields; he took her through to Edinburgh, under pretence of getting proper mourning for her; and there she was most kindly received by the Balwhinnans, who did what they could to assuage her all-absorbing grief. There also Ludovick had abundant opportunity of talking over his present circumstances with his old friend.

"I shall be glad when I get her finally and for ever away from that place," he said. "It is not the right atmosphere for her; it never could have been. Naturally she is a most blithe and good-humoured girl, alert and merry, quite contented with everything, nothing making her so happy as seeing those round about her in full enjoyment. She is far too quick-witted, she has too much common sense, to believe in the gospel of useless renunciation—to believe in the efficacy of perpetual little martyrdoms—to measure your chance of heaven by the number of groans and sighs you can crowd into an afternoon——"

"My good friend," remonstrated Balwhinnan, smiling and shaking his head, "you will never understand those people."

"I understand them as far as I have seen them," the younger man said confidently. "And what I have observed in them is plenty of faith, and plenty of hope, but

not the fifteenth part of a grain of charity. Oh, I can tell you they let me know pretty clearly that I was a leper, and to be shunned; and what's more, Alison saw it too—though she didn't say anything; if it had not been for this great trouble occupying her entirely, I fancy she might have given a certain Mr. Cowan a bit of her mind. Not that it mattered to me; it amused me in a way. But the cheek of some people! Of course they have all the religion, and all the conscience, that exist among the sons of men; and the fashion in which they have secured a monopoly of the good things in the next world is just beautiful to behold. It seems to me, Balwhinnan, you want a modern apostle to go preaching through some of your South of Scotland smaller towns; and I could furnish him with a text for his sermons—Beware of spiritual pride."

"At all events," the advocate said, "you are better satisfied now that you did not go to law in order to find out where the young lady was."

"We did not appeal to the law; we broke it," Ludovick said simply. "If that rascal of a lad had not made a most outrageous, violent, and unprovoked attack on an unoffending divinity student, I don't see how we ever could have found out where she was."

"But it will be all the easier for you now to make friends with the old Minister before you go back home—that is what your wife seems chiefly anxious about at present."

"I know," said the younger man rather gloomily. "And I don't see much chance of it. When I first heard of that poor girl's illness, I thought it might offer a way towards some kind of reconciliation; but I am not so sure now. And I know Alison will be fretting over her father's loneliness. His loneliness! His loneliness seems to me merely the isolation of pride. Of course I admit

that there is something fine in the contempt or indifference he seems to have for anything that may happen to him in this world; there is something fine in that; it is worthy of Epictetus, though I suppose the Minister would call it ordinary Christian fortitude. I can see what is fine in that; even if it leads him to disregard the claims of natural affection, even if he refuses to his only daughter the trifle of sympathy and consideration she is begging and praying for in her heart. Well, I will do what I can towards making matters smooth. I will go to him and offer him my hand; I will ask him for the briefest message of kindness that I may take to Alison——"

"Don't you think," his friend said gently, "that it might be better for her to go herself?"

"She shall not do anything of the sort!" Ludovick said, with a flash in his eyes. "She has suffered enough already; she shall suffer no more, in that quarter. Do you think I want a jury of elders and elders' wives to come together to consider her conduct? Do you think she is to go as a suppliant to *them?* Not while I can prevent it!"

"It was only a suggestion of mine," the lawyer said good-naturedly. "You see, you are not the most diplomatic person in the world, Macdonell; and you might go with some prejudice in your mind, some resentment, perhaps, over what happened formerly; and that might make things different. Then, again, you must remember the natural relation between father and daughter."

"What did he do before?" the younger man demanded. "He handed her over to the custody of Mrs. Cowan. I suppose she was not deemed worthy to be in his sight, She was sent away to be purified of her iniquities and transgressions; and then she was to come back a contrite penitent. And you see she is not a contrite penitent yet. If she went all by herself to that house, she might have

her sins and enormities flaunted before her again. She might have the sermon that was preached at her from the pulpit repeated for her benefit. She might have that sickening hypocrite of a woman whining over her as a brand not yet plucked from the burning. Well, then, I say 'No, thank you,' to all that. She is not going to encounter anything of the kind. I will make it my business to see she shall *not*."

The advocate scratched his head.

"Well, I don't know what the mischief is to come of it all," he said, with a perplexed air. "I wish both of you were back in Lochaber, leaving time to smooth away these differences. But if you go to this old man with such an antagonism of feeling——"

Ludovick Macdonell—who was really a most good-humoured and generous-spirited kind of person, when he was not harassed by these bitter memories—suddenly looked up, and said with a frank smile—

"You need not be afraid of that, Balwhinnan. I give you my word that when I go to see the old Minister I will abase myself down to the ground—for Alison's sake."

The day of the funeral was dark and grim. Over the thick smoke-laden atmosphere of Kirk o' Shields hung leaden skies; and a continuous rain poured into the melancholy streets. The funeral service, as is customary in Scotland, took place in the house, the friends and relatives assembling in the parlour, while the coffin lay in the room above. The Minister, worn of face and sad-eyed, but still with the same air of lofty resignation and acquiescence, stood at the head of the table, an open Bible before him, while in measured and monotonous tones he admonished this little group of sorrowing folk of the vanity and worthlessness of human life, and reminded them of the great eternal prize towards which they should

be pressing, through these brief moments here below. And it was almost with tenderness, but with no break in his voice, that he referred to the young girl who had been taken away from them. She had been a faithful handmaid of the Lord. She had walked according to the light. In so far as her station and years allowed, she had been attentive to her duties; she had been as the child Samuel, who ministered unto the Lord before Eli the priest. And even as the Lord had called to Samuel, and the child had answered, "Speak, Lord; for thy servant heareth," so to this other young ministrant and servant He had sent His summons, and she had answered, and gone home to her rest. Why should they weep, or doubt the infinite wisdom and mercy of Him who ruled all things, even the smallest? Their young sister in the Lord had only gone before, to her exceeding gain. And then he repeated the words of Paul to the Thessalonians: "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him."

But here a terrible thing occurred. The old servant-woman Margaret, who was standing near the doorway, was taken with a violent trembling, and she sank on her knees to the floor, and raised her clasped hands above her head, and called aloud, with a piteous cry—

"Lord God, have mercy upon me! have mercy upon me! They're a' looking forrit to seeing her again; they're a' to meet her there except me—except me! She'll no come near where I am—in the everlasting fire! Lord God, have mercy upon me! Will ye no have mercy on a poor sinner? Is there to be no mercy for me through all eternity? Lord God, have peety—have peety!"

The Minister paused. "Remove that poor woman,"

he said, in a calm, grave voice; and when they had raised the poor trembling wretch and led her from the room, he continued the solemn, simple, unimposing service.

When that was over, the coffin was brought down and placed in the hearse; and as the sombre vehicle slowly moved away, the male relatives and friends (the women-folk remaining in the house) proceeded to follow it on foot, two by two, led by the Minister himself and his chief elder, Mr. Cowan of Corbieslaw. The small, irregular black procession made its way through the rain and along these dingy thoroughfares till it reached the cemetery just outside the town. And of all the dismal sights about Kirk o' Shields, surely this was the most melancholy. Here were no white stones marking the graves of the loved and lost ones, nor carefully tended flowers in their purity and sweetness emblematic of the kind remembrance, the wistful hope, that placed them there. The head-stones were dank and sodden with wet and smoke; the bits of bushes here and there were leafless, withered, and black; the very grass was grimy. The hearse came to within a few yards of the open grave; then the coffin was taken out and carried over, and slowly and reverently lowered into its resting-place. It had but the one white wreath upon it. That Alison had brought with her from Edinburgh; you cannot buy flowers in Kirk o' Shields if you wished. There was no service by the side of the grave. When the coffin had been lowered, the friends and relatives took a last look; then, as the grave-diggers began their work, they fell to talking among themselves; finally, in scattered groups, they set out again for the town and for their several homes, walking through the heavy rain. Ludovick was alone all this time; no one had spoken to him, or taken any notice of him.

But when he returned to the Minister's house to fetch

away Alison, he was surprised to find she had already gone, though Mrs. Cowan and one or two others of the women-folk were still there. She had returned to the inn, the servant-maid informed him, shortly after the funeral had left. So, as this seemed as good an opportunity as any for trying to come to some amicable understanding with the Minister, he bade the servant-lass inform Mr. Blair that he would like to see him for a moment. She knocked at the door of the Minister's room and delivered her message; Mr. Blair came out into the passage, and she discreetly disappeared.

"Mr. Blair," said Macdonell, "Alison will be going away this afternoon, and she would like to say good-bye to you——"

"It is unnecessary," the Minister said calmly.

"Perhaps so," said the intermediator, in as gentle and submissive a fashion as possible, "but—but—it is only natural for a girl to wish to part on good terms with her father; and I think especially at such a time as the present there might be a—a little consideration for family ties. As for myself, I offer you my hand, and ask you to forget what is past, as I hope to do also. I don't wish to have any feeling of resentment towards any man, least of all towards Alison's father. I know you have reason to complain of me, and though I cannot honestly say that I regret having induced Alison to enter into that hasty marriage, still I can understand how it would strike you, and I ask your pardon."

Mr. Blair did not take the proffered hand.

"It is unnecessary, perhaps something more than unnecessary, for my daughter to come here," he said, in grave, deliberate tones, and there was no expression save that customary sadness in the sunken eyes and in the worn and lined face; "and it is unnecessary for you to make explanations or apologies for that which is now

irremediable. To open up these matters again might merely lead to contention and reproach, which I am far from desiring. My daughter has chosen her own path; let her follow it. I will not be her judge. Perhaps when we win to the greater light we may see with different eyes. The Lord's ways are not as our ways; there may be guidance where we find only footsteps wandering in the dark; in His good time we shall know all. As for you, I hope I bear you no enmity; I would part with you without bitterness; but before you go I would ask of you one question. Do I understand that you have not sought to lead away my daughter from the faith of her childhood, from the faith in which those of her house who have gone before have found peace and consolation in their dying hours? I—I understood it to be so—is it so?"

"Certainly it is so!" Ludovick said with emphasis. "Alison is absolutely free in all such matters—of course she is. If she chooses to go to the Established Church in Fort William, that is simply because the Munroes go there: she may go to any church she pleases, and welcome."

"And if there are children of the marriage?" the old man said.

"If there are children of the marriage, they will be brought up in their mother's faith; I pledge you my honour to that."

Mr. Blair hesitated, but only for a second.

"I thank you," he said, in the same grave, unimpassioned voice, and he seemed about to go.

"But—but have you no message for Alison?" Ludovick asked, in an appealing kind of way.

"I would not have her think there was aught of bitterness in my heart against her," he answered; and then he added, with slow impressiveness, "Nay, I wish you both well." And with that the Minister, reserved, austere, unapproachable, passed into his own room.

Ludovick Macdonell did not go straight back to the inn; he went along to the unfrequented thoroughfare overlooking the canal and the iron-works; and paced up and down there (though the rain was still falling heavily) that he might make the best of this message that he had to carry to Alison. And when at last he returned, and found her standing at the window, looking out into the wet streets, he said—

"Why did you leave the house, Ailie? I went back expecting to find you there."

She turned to him at once.

"Well, Ludovick," said she, somewhat proudly, "I did not choose that your wife should remain there to be—to be—looked at askance."

"Oh, you must not heed the looks, or the words either, of people like that!" said he quite cheerfully. (Perhaps he was not so ill-pleased that his young wife had resented the manner of the elders' wives towards her.) "What are they to you? But I have brought a message for you from your father. Oh yes; he was not nearly so implacable as you might imagine. He was quite courteous and civil, in his reserved way. Of course, he said he thought it would be unnecessary for you to go and bid him a formal good-bye at the present time, and that he would rather not have me go into any explanations or excuses; and that is reasonable. I saw that he did not want to have any controversy, such as might arise, and might produce bitterness. No; he said he had no feeling against either of us; that perhaps it might appear to him some day as if everything had been for the best; and the last words he said, Ailie, were that he wished you well. These were his last words. '*I wish you both well*,' he said. Oh, I can look forward a year or two, and see what his present attitude will lead to; but in the mean time you ought to be very glad that he is so amicably disposed

towards us. And there's another thing I've got to tell you, Ailie," Captain Ludovick continued, in the same cheerful and hopeful strain. "We are not going to set out for the Highlands this afternoon."

"No?" she said; and her face, that had been painfully anxious when he began to tell her of that interview, was now grown much more placid and grateful and content.

"No; at least, not directly back. The simple fact is this, Ailie: you are being thoroughly spoiled in Lochaber. You get such an inordinate quantity of petting that all your natural firmness of character is being destroyed. It isn't wholesome; it's far from wholesome. The old laird is the worst, it is true; but the rest of them are nearly as bad. You're being softened and blunted into a sentimental, jelly-fish sort of condition."

"But it's very nice, Ludovick," she pleaded.

"I tell you it isn't wholesome. It is most detrimental to your character," Captain Ludovick maintained. "You want somebody to sharpen you—to keep your wits on edge—to make you hold your own, and give an account of yourself. Well, I'm going to get such a person. I am going to take you through to Glasgow to-night. To-morrow we shall go down the Clyde to Rothesay. There I shall take possession of your aunt Gilchrist, and carry her off with us to Fort William, and establish her at Oyre for the winter. That will counteract the petting, I think! And why shouldn't she spend the winter with us as well as at that Hydropathic place? My gracious! haven't we as pure drinking-water at Oyre as they've got at Rothesay?"

And well Alison knew what it was that had led him to make this proposal; it was no desire to provoke a series of temper-combats, good-humoured as these assuredly would be, for his own amusement; it was the thought that she might feel a little lonely in the world after the

death of her sister, and herself removed from among her kinsfolk and former friends.

She went up to him and kissed him.

"Ah, Ludovick," she said, with swimming eyes, "you are so kind to me!"

THE END.

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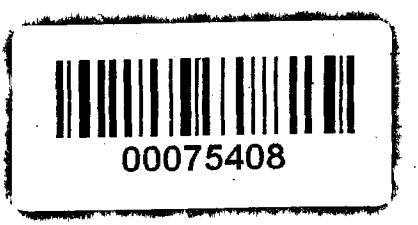
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